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Author(s): Michael Geyer

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# Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October 1918\*

Michael Geyer  
*University of Chicago*

The defense of the nation, an insurrection of the people must be . . . initiated. . . . There is absolutely no time for delay.<sup>1</sup>

Insurrectionary warfare is not commonly associated with German military thought. Nor is the idea of the *levée en masse* considered part of the Prussian military tradition or, for that matter, of the German way of fighting war. Yet, there it is: the call for all-out war in the defense of the nation, for a *levée en masse*, issued on October 7, 1918, and debated at some length by the war cabinet of Prince Max von Baden, the last imperial government and the first quasi-parliamentary one. To be sure, the appeal referred to a *Volkserhebung* (popular insurrection) rather than a *levée*. But the reference to the French original was used interchangeably in political deliberations during October 1918.<sup>2</sup> That is, the possibility of “going French” as a last resort for imperial Germany was well understood, with no irony intended.

The appeal is especially curious if we consider that it was issued by Walther Rathenau, the industrialist and intellectual, against the objections of the guiding spirit of the Third Supreme Command, General Erich Ludendorff. Of course, Rathenau had been involved in the war effort all along. He had instigated or, in any case, helped to create a Department of War Raw Materials

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<sup>1</sup> Die nationale Verteidigung, die Erhebung des Volkes muß eingeleitet . . . werden. . . . [Es] darf kein Tag verloren gehen. Walther Rathenau, “Ein dunkler Tag,” *Vossische Zeitung*, October 7, 1918, repr. in Walther Rathenau, *Gesammelte Schriften in sechs Bänden* (Berlin, 1929), 6:258–61.

<sup>2</sup> On the explicit use of the French terminology, see Erich Matthias and Rudolf Morsey, eds., *Die Regierung des Prinzen Max von Baden* (Düsseldorf, 1962), pp. 92, 103.

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(*Kriegsrohstoffamt*) in 1914. But it is one thing for a leading industrialist to mobilize industry at the beginning of the war. It is an entirely different matter to plead for a popular uprising to continue war in the face of defeat—against Ludendorff who had come to Berlin in order to plead for an armistice and allegedly used “these moving words to the most German of all German Jews”: “Two sons of my wife have fallen in the air war, and as you know, I loved them like my own children. As long as I believed in victory, I was at liberty to lead every division against the enemy. Since the moment I lost this faith, I no longer have the right to let any son of any German mother die.”<sup>3</sup> Need we recall that, in 1922, Rathenau was murdered by right-wing assassins for betraying Germany and delivering the nation to the French, while Ludendorff had become a valiant hero struck down, albeit metaphorically, by an evil conspiracy of Jews and Freemasons?<sup>4</sup>

Everything seems upside down with Rathenau’s appeal for an “insurrection of the people.” The high priest of corporate management calling for an insurrectionary people’s war? A German-Jewish civilian firing up a *furor teutonicus*? A revolutionary French call to arms to defend an imperial monarchy? All this sounds surreal. It is not surprising, then, that Rathenau scholars are mildly embarrassed by his call to arms, while military historians tend to brush it aside.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this essay is to find out how and to what effect the German government, the military, and a national public came to debate the issue of a popular insurrection or a *levée en masse* in 1918 and what, if anything at all, this Franco-German hybrid of ideas was about.

Rathenau’s plea seems to dovetail with a debate among contemporary historians as to the nature of conscription and of the modern nation-in-arms.<sup>6</sup> But in the end, there was more at stake. Rathenau’s call for popular insurrection turns out to be part and parcel of a national strategy for coping with defeat that challenges our basic understanding of the end of World War I.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Breucker, *Die Tragik Ludendorffs: Eine kritische Studie auf Grund persönlicher Erinnerungen an den General und seine Zeit* (Stollhamm, 1953), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Sabrow, *Die verdrängte Verschwörung: Der Rathenau-Mord und die deutsche Gegenrevolution* (Frankfurt, 1999). On the conspiracy, see Erich Ludendorff, *Die überstaatlichen Mächte im letzten Jahr des Weltkrieges* (Leipzig, n.d. [1927]).

<sup>5</sup> On Rathenau, see Gerhard Hecker, *Walther Rathenau und sein Verhältnis zu Militär und Krieg* (Boppard am Rhein, 1983), pp. 428–44; Ernst Schulin, *Walther Rathenau: Repräsentant, Kritiker und Opfer seiner Zeit* (Göttingen, 1979). Among military historians, see Peter Graf von Kielmannsegg, *Deutschland und der Erste Weltkrieg*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart, 1980), p. 671. The English literature seems to be unaware of the issue; see John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Ute Frevert, *Militär und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1997). Roland G. Foerster, ed., *Die Wehrpflicht: Entstehung, Erscheinungsformen und politisch-militärische Wirkung* (Munich, 1994). Eckardt Opitz and Frank S. Rödiger, eds., *Allgemeine Wehrpflicht: Geschichte, Probleme, Perspektiven* (Bremen, 1994).

Most historians follow the lead of Gerhard Ritter, who considered it an “illusion to believe . . . that the German people, half starved and plagued by the influenza virus, ‘thinned out’ in hundreds of supplementary drafts and their patriotism overstrained, would now once again be inflamed in a *furor teuton-icus* and would let themselves be formed into a ‘*levée en masse*.’”<sup>7</sup> This argument is reasonable enough. It has been supported by evidence suggesting a covert “military strike” that developed during summer 1918.<sup>8</sup> While one may want to debate the causes and question the nature of this “strike,” there was exhaustion, hunger, desperation and, at the very end, flight and a refusal to fight.<sup>9</sup> This said, it is somewhat surprising that Ritter should use such strong language in order to downplay what he characterizes as mere “ideas of certain literati and publicists.”<sup>10</sup> It is also strange that he should refuse to study the “deeply depressing and often chaotic negotiations” that ensued—with the end result that we never really learn what happened in October 1918.<sup>11</sup> The desire to discount the idea, let alone the possibility of a *levée*, is evidently stronger than the wish to explore the initiative.

The reluctance to study what happened extends beyond the conservative history of Gerhard Ritter. When Hans-Ulrich Wehler recently emphasized that the November revolution was the cumulative effect of the German Empire’s assorted problems, he made a point that one can readily endorse.<sup>12</sup> But why should remote causes dating back to the 1890s carry so much weight in explaining 1918, while the impending defeat and the way it was negotiated, both in politics and society, should matter so little? The effect is much the same as with Ritter’s argument. A month or two in the calendar of 1918 are missing—the empire collapsing sometime between July and September 1918; the war

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk: Das Problem des “Militarismus” in Deutschland*, vol. 4: *Die Herrschaft des deutschen Militarismus und die Katastrophe von 1918* (Munich, 1968), pp. 417–18. See, e.g., Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (New York, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Deist, “Der militärische Zusammenbruch des Kaiserreichs. Zur Realität der Dolchstoßlegende,” in *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft: Studien zur preußisch-deutschen Militärgeschichte*, ed. Wilhelm Deist (Munich, 1991), pp. 211–33, and “Verdeckter Militärstreik im Kriegsjahr 1918,” in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Munich, 1995), pp. 146–67; Nick Howard, “The German Revolution Defeated and Fascism Deferred: The Servicemen’s Revolt and Social Democracy at the End of the First World War, 1918–1920,” in *Opposing Fascism: Community, Authority, and Resistance in Europe*, ed. Tim Kirk and Anthony McElligott (Cambridge and New York, 1999), pp. 12–32.

<sup>9</sup> Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer, 1914–1918* (Göttingen, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Ritter 4:418.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:425.

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Der erste totale Krieg: Woran das deutsche Kaiserreich zugrunde ging—und was darauf folgte,” *Die Zeit* 35 (August 20, 1998), p. 66.

being lost; and history being restarted with the November revolution. It is as if a Hegelian spirit of History relentlessly drove events forward and helped German historiography over the months of defeat. A curious anticipation of defeat in all of German historiography suggests that it still hurts. For German historians, defeat has always already happened, so that one does not have to look too closely at how and when and to what effect the German military and, for that matter, the German nation capitulated.<sup>13</sup> The only ones to rub it in are mostly Commonwealth and a few British military historians who celebrate a British military victory that in most every other respect proved to be a disaster for the mother country.<sup>14</sup> Such are the emotions of this war's end.

The most egregious consequence of effacing defeat consists in the unwitting perpetuation of the so-called stab-in-the-back legend, according to which the imperial army remained undefeated but was sabotaged by civilian rule and eventually brought down by unrest and revolution at home which delivered Germany into the hands of the Allies.<sup>15</sup> This polemic was meant to salvage the imperial elites and their supporters and to denigrate the Weimar Republic.<sup>16</sup> It was used by the Nazis and, above all, by Hitler to denounce democracy and tar the Weimar "system" with the responsibility for defeat.<sup>17</sup> The viciousness of these attacks helps to explain the historians' tendency to overdetermine the causes of the November revolution and to downplay defeat. The unwitting consequence of rejecting the stab-in-the-back ideology consists in accepting the structure of the stab-in-the-back argument that, indeed, a breakdown of domestic and military morale ushered in German defeat—except that they change the meaning of morale. Now this breakdown is presented as a righteous and progressive upheaval and as the inevitable outcome of past injustice.<sup>18</sup> While more palatable, this view simply does not square with what happened in October 1918.

A more careful look at the dramatic political and military choices of October 1918 suggests that the stab-in-the-back argument is not just specious—it is

<sup>13</sup> The otherwise excellent collection by Jörg Dupler and Gerhard P. Groß, eds., *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Munich, 1999) is a good indication of this trend.

<sup>14</sup> J. P. Harris and Niall Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice: The BEF in the Hundred Days' Campaign, 8 August–11 November 1918* (London and Washington, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Ulrich Heinemann, *Die verdrängte Niederlage: Politische Öffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Siegfried A. Kaehler, "Vier quellenkritische Untersuchungen zum Kriegsende 1918," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen I. Philologische Klasse*, no. 8 (1960): 423–81. Herfried Münkler and Wolfgang Storch, *Siegfrieden: Politik mit einem deutschen Mythos* (Berlin, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (New York, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Fritz Klein, Willibald Gutsche, and Joachim Petzold, eds., *Deutschland im ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 1968).

plain wrong. It garbles the sequence of events, reverses cause and effect, and slanders with impunity all those in Germany who were desperate about German defeat but who clearly were not on the political Right and, in fact, held the Right responsible for the disaster that had befallen Germany. It suppresses the single most important event of October 1918—that the government of Prince Max von Baden decided, despite its despair over having “to make a lost war lost,” to end the war—and it disregards all the tortured and terrified reasoning over how to achieve this end.<sup>19</sup> The stab-in-the-back argument ignores all those who did not believe that one could and should pursue a peace *à tout prix* and who, nonetheless, came to the conclusion that the war had to end here and now. It does not even begin to account for the contributions of all those who thought that “peace now” was not just the right thing but also the very best thing that could happen to Germany, even though they knew perfectly well that they, as opposed to the imperial elites, would have to pay the price.<sup>20</sup> It makes light, above all, of the deep emotional crisis that ran through German society in the wake of defeat. Post–World War II historiography did not delve into the politics of the stab-in-the-back legend, and it shied away from the grave realities of defeat. Hence, it could not explain the difference defeat made in the lives of individuals and of the nation.<sup>21</sup> Yet, the course of Germany in the twentieth century was shaped by its defeats and the ways in which the people, the nation, and the international system coped with them.

With so much “reality” habitually bracketed, it may seem capricious to turn from a reconstructed history of events to a history of what ultimately was a fantasy—at least in 1918. For nothing came of Rathenau’s or, for that matter, anybody else’s idea of a popular insurrection. Fatigue and resistance on the one hand and Allied military victory on the other effectively precluded all efforts to initiate a national insurrection in the wake of the decision to end the war. Nonetheless, the decision not to pursue “real” insurrectionary war dramatically enhanced the powers of the imaginary war of insurrection, or *Volkskrieg*, that emerged from the ruins of the real one. Once articulated, the idea of popular insurrection opened a horizon of expectations, images, yearnings, and desires that would not go away. We discover here not just the repercussions of defeat but also the contours of an imaginary of catastrophic nationalism that obliges its citizens to die in order for the nation to live—enunciated as a “natural” and self-evident reaction to the loss of liberty in defeat. What we

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich von Payer, in the Cabinet meeting of October 20, 1918; Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), p. 289.

<sup>20</sup> Dieter Riesenberger, *Geschichte der Friedensbewegung in Deutschland von den Anfängen bis 1933* (Göttingen, 1985), pp. 118–23.

<sup>21</sup> The exception is Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, 1993).

find is the idea of popular insurrection as a figure of modern myth and myth-making in the emphatic sense of the word “myth.”<sup>22</sup> Again, the charge is to establish, in the first place, the existence of such imaginings. But one is led to wonder about the repository of cultural memories into which the propagators of insurrectionary warfare tapped. What could possibly entice a German war cabinet to contemplate the idea of “going French” in 1918?

#### FEAR OF ANNIHILATION

The events of October 1918 were set in motion by the urgent request of the Supreme Command for immediate armistice and peace negotiations. Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff reacted to what they considered to be a desperate military situation. They insisted that a new and more representative government be formed in Berlin in order to carry forward the initiative. Their request was discussed and accepted in a meeting of military and civilian officials—Hindenburg, Ludendorff, Chancellor Georg Count von Hertling, and Foreign Minister Paul von Hintze—with the emperor at the Supreme Command’s headquarters in Spa on September 29. A new German government under the chancellorship of Prince Max von Baden, with participation of the left-center majority of the Reichstag, was inaugurated on October 4. It collapsed on November 9 with the overthrow of the monarchy. A first diplomatic note to the American president, Woodrow Wilson, went out in the night of October 3, initiating an exchange of notes that ended in the armistice of November 11.

What exactly happened on September 29 is in dispute.<sup>23</sup> Contemporaries could not agree on what transpired in the rush of meetings culminating in a War Council, and historians have forgotten what contemporaries could agree on—that September 29 was the actual beginning of the end. The stab-in-the-back legend asserts that government officials and members of the Reichstag were shocked by the results emanating from Spa. The argument continues that whereas Ludendorff, who had lost his composure in July and August due to the strains of overwork, quickly recovered, the civilians did not. They squandered their last chances to put up resistance against the Allies and did nothing to stop antiwar propaganda. The result was the descent into an armistice that,

<sup>22</sup> The idea of a code is borrowed from Shulamit Volkov, *Jüdisches Leben und Antisemitismus im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> The two most recent accounts are Joachim Petzold, “Die Entscheidung vom 29. September 1918,” *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte* 4 (1965): 517–34; and Eberhard Kessel, “Ludendorffs Waffenstillstandsforderung am 29. September 1918,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 2 (1968): 65–86.



in the wake of the revolution, amounted to a capitulation, although a continuation of war could have salvaged the German position.<sup>24</sup>

The only thing that seems true about this story is that Ludendorff faced the situation of late September with a preternatural calm.<sup>25</sup> He had found a resolution for both a deep personal and a military crisis—or so it is said. Truth here is inextricably interwoven with epic myth. Ludendorff's stature and diction reminded at least one member of his staff of the mythical hero Siegfried when pierced by the spear of Hagen.<sup>26</sup> Everyone agreed this was an "overwhelming historical moment." The notion of being "overwhelmed" is a suitable starting point for unraveling what happened because, in order to set the facts straight, it appropriately invokes the sublime—and even otherwise coldly professional general staff officers recognized that they had encountered a sublime moment of recognition, if not revelation.<sup>27</sup> For on September 29, late in the evening, Ludendorff repeated in a briefing to his staff officers what he had apparently said in the war council earlier: that the imperial field army faced imminent annihilation—not defeat, but annihilation.<sup>28</sup>

Some background is necessary here. The crushing Allied offensive of late September was not the first crisis of 1918. Ludendorff had feared a possible breakthrough of Allied forces ever since July 18, when French forces counterattacked successfully at Villers-Cotterets, and certainly since August 8, when British and Commonwealth formations broke through the German lines and, meeting no further resistance, effectively stopped themselves.<sup>29</sup> The near-

<sup>24</sup> Bernhard Schwertfeger, *Das Weltkriegsende: Gedanken über die deutsche Kriegführung* (Potsdam, 1937).

<sup>25</sup> Wolfgang Foerster, *Der Feldherr Ludendorff im Unglück: Eine Studie über seine seelische Haltung in der Endphase des ersten Weltkrieges* (Wiesbaden, 1952). I quote from the manuscript (fn. 27), because the published version is reduced and cleaned up. Franz Uhle-Wettler, *Erich Ludendorff in seiner Zeit: Soldat—Strateg—Revolutionär. Eine Neubewertung* (Berg, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Albrecht von Thae, *Generalstabsdienst an der Front und in der O. H. L. aus Briefen und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen, 1915–1919*, ed. Siegfried A. Kaehler (Göttingen, 1958), p. 234.

<sup>27</sup> Wolfgang Foerster, "Ludendorffs seelische Haltung im Unglück (15.VII.–26.X.1918)," typescript of a draft with extensive handwritten revisions, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter BA-MA) [Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres] W-10/50 723, here p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> He would subsequently deny having spoken of an impending catastrophe and made it look like an invention of Berlin civilians (who were out of their minds according to Ludendorff). He also rejected Paul von Hintze's account of the War Council of September 29. However, Hintze's account is for the most part truthful and, as far as Berlin is concerned, Ludendorff plain lied.

<sup>29</sup> Ludendorff famously characterized August 8 as the "black day of the German army." Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen, 1914–1918* (Berlin, 1919), p. 547.



successful breakthrough of August 8 led to the still overly wishful assessment that the imperial German army was no longer capable of conducting offensive operations and, with the depletion of German manpower, was limited to defensive measures and evasions. The Supreme Command chose to say that “the war could no longer be won,” but in effect it made clear that the war was lost.<sup>30</sup> This assessment was endorsed by a war council in Spa on August 13–14 and is rightly taken as a turning point in German strategic decision making. However, “the black day of August” should not be taken to obfuscate the disaster beckoning in late September.

The crisis in late September was, in the first instance, a strategic crisis which was caused by two very different factors—the events on the Macedonian front and the rapidly growing presence of the American forces on the western front. The unraveling of the southeastern front, with Bulgaria suing for peace and the odds growing against keeping the Habsburg Allies in the war, made the overall strategic situation desperate. The breakdown of the Balkan front, more than anything else, was the straw that broke the camel’s back according to Ludendorff—and, contrary to a common view that downplays the role of eastern Europe in World War I, Ludendorff had a point to make.<sup>31</sup> Also important was the growing role of the American forces. They began to weigh heavily long before they were deployed in full strength because their presence in the theater of war lent emotional support to the battered European Allies. They also freed up French and British reserves, and this, together with the British technological superiority in tanks, airplanes, and long range artillery, allowed for an effective concentration of firepower and troops—the prerequisites for a breakthrough. The upshot was the strategic isolation of an imperial Germany that now also proved to be in a distinctly inferior military position, both qualitatively and quantitatively, on the western front.

The September crisis was, in the second instance, an operational crisis of unprecedented magnitude—only comparable to the Russian defeats by the Central Powers. The nature of the operational crisis emerged both from the day-to-day assessment of the Allied offensive under way since September 26 and from a projection of what would likely happen in the near future. It was both real-time assessment and worst-case scenario, except that there was no better scenario in sight. The official briefing on September 29 at the Supreme

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 550–52.

<sup>31</sup> Erich Ludendorff and Hans von Haefen, “Copy of a First Note of General Ludendorff on the Events of August 18 to His Dismissal,” BA-MA W-10/52 066, p. 8. This was also the assessment of the section heads in the Supreme Command; see Foerster, “Ludendorff im Unglück,” p. 90; and Bogdan Krizman, “Der militärische Zusammenbruch auf dem Balkan im Herbst 1918,” *Österreichische Osthefte* 10 (1968): 268–93.

Command acknowledged that “yesterday our troops in Flanders suffered a major defeat.”<sup>32</sup> Colonel Albrecht von Thaer, section chief in the Supreme Command, recorded, apparently verbatim, Ludendorff’s assessment of this defeat in his diary: “It can be predicted that the enemy will succeed in the immediate future [*nächste Zukunft*] with a great victory, a breakthrough on an unprecedented scale [*im ganz großen Stile*] with the help of the Americans who clamor for battle. Then the western army will lose its last resolve [*letzten Halt*] and flood back in dissolution across the Rhine and carry the revolution into Germany.”<sup>33</sup> Ludendorff may have been wrong, the assessment itself a cabal of junior staff officers against the opinion of more senior staff officers in the field.<sup>34</sup> But it was the imminent fear of outright defeat in battle and its consequences, in particular the specter of revolution emerging from the beaten field army, that triggered the events of October 1918. The Supreme Command feared a “catastrophe” after the Russian model. No wonder, then, that some of the assembled staff members broke down in tears.<sup>35</sup>

Foreign Minister Hintze later asserted that Ludendorff had previously spoken in the Crown Council to the same effect. According to Hintze, Ludendorff highlighted the very real and imminent possibility of “a breakthrough of the enemy, a decisive defeat (*vernichtende Niederlage*) at the point of the breakthrough, drawing in neighboring formations, an uncontrolled flooding back of troops and the eventual dissolution of the imperial army with extraordinary losses in men and material.”<sup>36</sup> In German military diction this amounted to

<sup>32</sup> The Bavarian military representative at the Supreme Command noted the unusual nature of this admission which stood in contrast to the habit of “making every set-back into a major German victory” and added that “this unusual veracity makes one think.” He concluded that “if they do not find the courage to tell the full truth today, a catastrophe will be inevitable.” Königlich bayerischer Militärbevollmächtigter beim Großen Hauptquartier, September 29, 1918; Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv [BayHStA], IV [Militärarchiv], Akten Kriegsministerium [Mkr]/1828.

<sup>33</sup> Thaer, p. 235.

<sup>34</sup> On the internal politics in Spa, see John D. Buckelew, “Erich Ludendorff and the German War Effort, 1916–1918: A Study in the Military Exercise of Power” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1974), pp. 418–22; and Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (New York, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Thaer, p. 235.

<sup>36</sup> Quote by Colonel Heye (chief of operations section, Supreme Command) is represented by Foreign Secretary Paul von Hintze in *Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, vol. 2: *Gutachten des Sachverständigen Oberst a.D. Bernhard Schwertfeger* [= Vierte Reihe im Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der Deutschen Verfassungsgebenden Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages, 1919–1926] (Berlin, 1925), p. 407 (the volume is hereafter referred to as UA [Untersuchungsausschuß] 4/2, page).

annihilation in battle. According to Hintze, catastrophe meant “complete military defeat, capitulation.” It was, in Hintze’s own interpretation, which explicitly reflected the precedents of Russia and Bulgaria, “*finis Germaniae*.”<sup>37</sup>

Did the Supreme Command really expect an Allied victory in battle to be imminent? This question is more difficult to answer—not the least because the Allies did not actually break through, at least not at this point, and may not even have sought a German-style breakthrough.<sup>38</sup> But the minds of both Ludendorff and his staff in late September were fixed on a breakthrough and its consequences. Apparently Ludendorff greeted his operations chief Wilhelm Heye day after day with a desultory “Now they are through,” evidently expecting the destruction and dissolution of the imperial army in the wake of a breakthrough.<sup>39</sup> He wanted an armistice in order to “save his army.”<sup>40</sup> While there is some debate on Ludendorff’s motive for an armistice, Thayer also noted Ludendorff saying that “this catastrophe [of dissolution and revolution] must be prevented at all costs,” adding that “for this reason we cannot afford to be beaten anymore.” Even tactical setbacks, in other words, could trigger collapse. General Hermann von Kuhl, one of the most esteemed field staff officers, reinforced the point with reference to a communication from the Supreme Command on October 3: “The charge is: the armies must be preserved, no catastrophes!”<sup>41</sup> This suggests that the notion of impending catastrophe was Ludendorff’s own or, at the very least, that he made it his own at this crucial juncture.<sup>42</sup> The idea of an armistice, and an “instant armistice” at that, emerged from the frantic attempt to salvage the army in the face of an expected rout and, thus, to prevent a Russian-type revolution. There is considerable evidence that the effort to preserve the field army was meant as a preventive measure to forestall a revolution. But since historians have not done their homework on the (prepared) domestic use of field formations, we must leave a discussion

<sup>37</sup> Ludendorff paraphrased by Hintze, UA 4/2, 408.

<sup>38</sup> On British tactics and operational doctrine, see Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916–1918* (New Haven and London, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> Ludendorff quoted by Hintze, UA 4/2, 405, 412.

<sup>40</sup> Colonel Haeften quoted in Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1928), p. 340: “Ich will meine Armee retten.”

<sup>41</sup> Telegram of Supreme Command in Kuhl collection, October 3, 1918, BA-MA W-10/50 652, p. 194.

<sup>42</sup> Erich Ludendorff, *Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung: Über ihre Tätigkeit, 1916–18* (Berlin, 1920), p. 530, with an explicit denial. Ludendorff forgot his own assessment that “a continuation of the war is useless” and that “the definite defeat of the German army is unavoidable,” according to Thayer, pp. 234–35. Instead he preferred to remember the loss of confidence in the German troops which in Ludendorff’s view had become unreliable.

of the higher rationale for the attempted preservation of the field army for another occasion.

Panic and fright in the face of impending defeat are normally attributed not to the Supreme Command but to the civilians in Berlin—officials and parliamentarians—reacting to what transpired in Spa. This depiction can be traced back to Ludendorff's account of the events in late October and has become a staple of the stab-in-the-back legend. If one believes Ludendorff, the civilians reacted in a "panic" which, he argued in late October, was unwarranted and led him to assert that the entire idea of a "catastrophe" was a civilian invention.<sup>43</sup> The civilians, in turn, maintained, also in hindsight, that they had been misled by propaganda and had no idea how serious the situation was—and historians by and large have followed their lead. In actual fact, the entire episode is a case of disinformation turned on its head—with the effect of garbling and misdirecting the unfolding events.

The Supreme Command had sent an emissary, Major Erich von dem Busche-Ippenbarg, to Berlin in order to inform the parliamentary representatives about the urgent need for an armistice. Regarding the military situation, Busche gave the civilians the grossly outdated news of August 13 ("we can no longer impose peace on our enemies") rather than the assessment of September 29. In effect, Busche lied about the seriousness of the situation as it was perceived by the Supreme Command.<sup>44</sup> However, he was also ordered to impress on the civilians that they should not procrastinate with forming a government but immediately issue an armistice "offer." Ludendorff wanted and needed an armistice fast and, in addition, simply had no patience with the civilians haggling over the terms of a new government or, for that matter, the armistice note. He treated politics as he always did—as an extension of war-fighting.<sup>45</sup> But now his haste and Busche's eagerness backfired because they left the Berliners with the very impression that Ludendorff had wanted to conceal from them—that the survival of the army depended on getting an armistice in a "matter not merely of days, but of hours."<sup>46</sup> This is clearly not what Busche said or intended, but it is what he communicated with his relentless pressure to get the armistice note sent off. Of course, Foreign Minister Hintze (and Finance Minister Siegfried Count von Roedern who, on September 29, had accompanied Chancellor Hertling to Spa as a potential successor) did not remain silent either, returning from Spa and spreading the news of impending disaster.<sup>47</sup> As a result, Berlin

<sup>43</sup> Ludendorff, *Urkunden*, p. 530.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 535–38.

<sup>45</sup> Erich Ludendorff, *Kriegführung und Politik* (Berlin, 1922).

<sup>46</sup> Note of Finance Minister Roedern on the events leading to the peace and armistice offer of October 4, 1918, UA 4/2, 418.

<sup>47</sup> Roedern was a key official in the imperial government. His goal at this point was

was abuzz with what Ludendorff only dared to intimate in solemn gestures—that there was an acute danger of the front collapsing and the imperial field army being routed. The civilians knew perfectly well what was going on. Their problem—at this point and even more so in hindsight—was that they had wanted to form a government of national defense and call up a *levée en masse* in the defense of the fatherland. They were the ones who had to be dragged into armistice negotiations by Ludendorff!

There was opposition against Ludendorff's initiative. However, it emerged from the field armies. Some senior officers, like Max von Gallwitz and Bruno von Mudra, strongly disagreed with Ludendorff's strategic assessment and the armistice initiative.<sup>48</sup> To be sure, others, such as Kuhl and Wilhelm Groener (who did not see eye to eye after the war), thought that the strategic assessment was right but that the decision to initiate armistice negotiations was premature and the timing of the decision wrong.<sup>49</sup> The tough part in selling the armistice decision, in other words, was that there was hardly anyone up front in the commands of the field armies who agreed wholeheartedly with the Supreme Command—although some conveniently disagreed after the fact.<sup>50</sup> The most serious opposition, to the point of blunt denunciation, came from the crown prince of Prussia's army command. Its chief of staff, Friedrich Graf von Schulenburg, called the armistice offer a "declaration of bankruptcy."<sup>51</sup> He made no bones, albeit in a private letter, that "a *Feldherr* who has the fate of 70 million people in his hand must have nerve. If he loses his nerve, he must go. To stay without nerve is unthinkable."<sup>52</sup> Ludendorff had done the unthinkable. He had effectively capitulated—and Schulenburg had his number. The hostility emanating from the crown prince's army command was absolutely implacable. This was one of the reasons why Ludendorff was not just dismissed but

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to ease in a new, more parliamentary government and especially a reform of the Prussian three-class system. Ludendorff accused him of exacerbating the crisis for his own ends.

<sup>48</sup> For the presentations of the Generals Gallwitz and Mudra, see Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), pp. 397–411.

<sup>49</sup> Max von Gallwitz, *Meine Föhrtätigkeit im Weltkrieg, 1914/1916: Belgien, Osten, Balkan* (Berlin, 1929), p. 441; Kuhl, diary excerpts, September 30, 1918, BA-MA W-10/50 652, p. 194 ("In other words, we declare the campaign lost, and start negotiations. Isn't this too early? First we need to stay put in the Hermannstellung."); Letter of Wilhelm Groener to Paul von Hintze, October 28, 1918, in Foerster, "Ludendorff im Unglück" (n. 27 above), pp. 102–3.

<sup>50</sup> See the vituperation of Wild von Hohenborn, which is directed at the government rather than his superiors. Wilhelm Deist, ed., *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg, 1914–1918*, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf, 1970), 2:1315–17.

<sup>51</sup> Note of Friedrich Graf von Schulenburg, n.d., BA-MA Nachlass Schulenburg, N58/1, p. 221.

<sup>52</sup> Foerster, "Ludendorff im Unglück," p. 104.

also fired at the end of October.<sup>53</sup> The deep rift between field army commands and Supreme Command, in any case, was apparent to everyone. It was papered over only long after the fact when Ludendorff soft-pedaled his original assessment of the situation and made the armistice initiative look like a temporary lapse of an overworked general staff officer and his bureau that had been exploited by panic-stricken civilians for their own ends.

However, the Supreme Command's assessment of the overall strategic and operational situation did not change until the end of the war. To be sure, the Supreme Command had regained some confidence about fending off a rout by October 6 (that is, after the armistice note went out) and now said, with some justification, that "after initial successes of the enemy the situation has calmed down. . . . The planned breakthrough has failed."<sup>54</sup> But it never recovered the ability to hold a line of defense against the Allied advance for the rest of the war. Typically, the Supreme Command stated that "the power of the German army is unbroken," but ultimately trust in the ability to hold a line of defense against enemy forces was gone.<sup>55</sup> On October 23, Hindenburg signed an altogether ephemeral but quite typical order which declared that "the forces of the field army do not suffice to guarantee holding fixed positions."<sup>56</sup> Ludendorff's successor, General Groener, would repeat the same line in his retrospective *tour d'horizon* to the cabinet on November 5. It is interesting that Groener emphasized that the morale of the field army remained strong with few exceptions—a point that is reaffirmed by a postwar collection of situation reports. German troops were giving ground, but when ordered they would fight.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, Groener misjudged the situation that unfolded at the front at the very moment he talked to the cabinet. If German forces had been unable to hold lines of defense for any length of time, after November 4—the battles

<sup>53</sup> Within the framework of the stab-in-the-back debate there was always another and altogether equally vicious but entirely internal debate about the military leadership having lost its nerve and raised "the white flag." It is a debate that resurfaced in earnest in 1942–43 both in the Nazi and the military leadership—but then transformed by the mythical memory of 1918.

<sup>54</sup> Tieschowitz, research for the final volume [of *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918*], summer 1940, ms. p. 184, BA-MA W-10/50 726, p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> Instructions to the Armistice Commission, October 23, 1918 (signed Hindenburg and Ludendorff); *Amtliche Urkunden zur Vorgeschichte des Waffenstillstandes 1918*, 2d ed. (Berlin, 1924), pp. 191–92.

<sup>57</sup> Hermann Cron, "Konnte das deutsche Heer im November 1918 weiterkämpfen? Untersuchungen auf Grund der Kriegsakten der Kommandobehörden," n.d., BA-MA W-10/52095. There is a good case to be made for revisiting the entire issue of morale in 1918. Meeting of the Cabinet with General Groener, November 5, 1918; Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), pp. 529–32.

at Valenciennes and at the Sambre—their defensive retreat broke down.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, the armistice achieved on November 11 what it was supposed to be doing on September 29. But nobody cared to remember that the field army was defeated and saved by the armistice. The actual rout was one of those niggling details that got lost in the revolution and in the subsequent unwillingness of historians to inquire into the circumstances of the German defeat.

In sum, the armistice “offer” was Ludendorff’s effort at damage control in the face of an expected total collapse of the front and its presumed consequence, revolution at home. The idea of an armistice offer was likely the brainchild of the Supreme Command’s section chiefs, but Ludendorff made it his own.<sup>59</sup> He was well aware that the “offer” was a “grave decision.” While he occasionally wavered, he stuck to it for the time being and only much later came to regret it.<sup>60</sup> Hindenburg, his formal superior, backed up Ludendorff in the Crown Council of September 29, although he was apparently more non-committal when it came to implementing the armistice initiative. Other tensions mounted between Hindenburg and Ludendorff as well, to which we will return. But fundamentally Hindenburg agreed with his staff’s assessment on September 29—and the words matter here—“to seek an end.”<sup>61</sup> Hindenburg and Ludendorff had come to the conclusion—and the emperor concurred—that the military situation had become untenable. They were prepared to bring the war to an end and were even ready, within narrow limits, to accept responsibility for defeat. Their main concern was that revolution, which they thought would emanate from a routed field army, must be averted.

The main problem with this reading of events is that what the Supreme Command deemed acceptable as peace on September 29 was and is difficult to square with an admission of defeat.<sup>62</sup> This led to the suspicion among historians, but first articulated among the Allies, that the offer was a deceit from

<sup>58</sup> J. P. Harris, “Das britische Expeditionsheer in der Hundert Tage Schlacht vom 8. August bis 11. November 1918,” in Dupler and Groß, eds. (n. 13 above), pp. 116–34, here p. 133.

<sup>59</sup> Ritter (n. 7 above), 4:415, speaks of a “palace revolution” of the section chiefs.

<sup>60</sup> Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen* (n. 29 above), p. 582.

<sup>61</sup> Generalfeldmarschall [Paul] von Hindenburg, *Aus meinem Leben* (Leipzig, 1934), p. 306.

<sup>62</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York, 1967); Winfried Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918* (Vienna and Munich, 1966); Immanuel Geiss, “Armistice in Eastern Europe and the Fatal Sequels: Successor States and Wars, 1918–1923,” in *At the Eleventh Hour: Reflections, Hopes, and Anxieties at the Closing of the Great War, 1918*, ed. Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, 1998), pp. 237–54. It seems to me that a renewal of the debate on war aims is imperative, but the topic far exceeds the limits of this essay.



the start.<sup>63</sup> Such a reading, while not to be discarded entirely, misses the desperate state of affairs in the German Supreme Command. It also obscures what is important about the issue of an armistice and a potential renewal of hostilities. The Supreme Command clearly kept open the possibility of a renewal or a continuation of war<sup>64</sup>—but if it came to it, this was to be war in a different key.

Ludendorff had rather old-fashioned ideas about the peace process. He thought that, once the offer for peace negotiations was accepted in principle, delegates would be sent to Washington for negotiations while a cease-fire would be in effect for the duration of the meetings.<sup>65</sup> This sounds like a fairytale ending for World War I, but it is what the Supreme Command came up with at the end of September. The seriousness of the intent can be gauged by the fact that Ludendorff condoned concessions that only a month earlier had been unthinkable. He accepted President Wilson's fourteen points (even if there was some tinkering as to what that meant), pushed for a parliamentarization of the German government as a prerequisite for negotiations, and was ready to negotiate about Lorraine. Furthermore, he even agreed to a staged but complete withdrawal of German troops from western occupied territories in case of an armistice. Above all, these concessions reinforce the sense of absolute urgency. Ludendorff's main goal at this point was to keep a defeated army intact. Concurrent with despair was a powerful sense of equality and, indeed, of a newly acquired entitlement to equality. Ludendorff repeated like a mantra that "the German people had a right to honorable conditions"—if only because they fought so hard for so long. If the armistice was to preserve the army, equality in peace negotiations was to maintain German pride. Ludendorff was caught on the horns of a dilemma. He felt he had to come to an armistice, in spite of what the field staffs said, in order to save the imperial army. But in order to make peace in the face of defeat, he could not possibly maintain the status of equality which the terms of honor dictated.

It was in this atmosphere that ideas about a war after the war began to take shape. The issue came up very briefly when Ludendorff sat down to have a talk from the heart with Ernst von Eisenhart-Rothe after the staff briefing on September 29. The two of them began to reminisce about a more glorious past. At the end of the conversation, Eisenhart-Rothe brought up the issue of a renewal of hostilities if and when, "as was to be expected, the Allies were to make insufferable demands."

<sup>63</sup> Bullitt Lowry, *Armistice 1918* (Kent, Ohio, 1996); Pierre Renouvin, *L'armistice de Rethondes, 11 November 1918: Trent journées qui ont fait la France* (Paris, 1968).

<sup>64</sup> Tieschowitz, BA-MA W-10/50 726, p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> Ludendorff, *Urkunden* (n. 42 above), p. 534.

Then, will Excellency [Ludendorff] not hope with me that a *furor teutonicus* will break out in the entire land, like August 1914 had seen, which will give us the ability to fight on, albeit unto annihilation. His [Ludendorff's] eyes started to gleam and he responded with a strong and secure voice: "I count on it and hope for sure."<sup>66</sup>

We should take this effusion as an indication that the Supreme Command always considered the possibility of a renewal of hostilities—which is what the Allies feared, because they were uncertain if their troops would get going again. But we should also note that the feared collapse of the field army set in motion a change in what it meant to fight war. The war to be fought now had no particular strategic purpose, not even the defense of territorial integrity. Renewal of hostilities meant engaging in a war of honor, whether fought in France and Belgium or at the Rhine, leading to self-destruction.

An assessment of the situation by the Political Bureau of the Supreme Command on October 6 amplified the notion of war "unto destruction" and suggests that Ludendorff's effusion on September 29 was no mere talk from the heart. It started from the presumption that the German armistice "offer" would fail and, as such, is one of the first serious indications of second thoughts in Ludendorff's staff about the entire process. It ended with the explication of what a war "unto destruction" entailed.

If the Entente does not countenance the armistice and peace offer, but will force us down on our knees, they will find the people and the army ready to defend German honor and German soil to the last. The army's might is not yet broken. Step by step we will retreat toward the borders of the Reich. If the occupied territories are to be given over to devastation, the Allies will be responsible.<sup>67</sup>

This was war in a new key. It was set off by fear about a humiliating defeat and put in motion by the expectation of and readiness for collective self-destruction or "war to the last." The latter granted the license for devastation without guilt, for responsibility was imputed to those who threatened overwhelming defeat in the first place. A dead man can kill with impunity. This is, as we shall see, the "black flag" of insurrectionary warfare, culminating in a final battle not on enemy territory but on the German site of myth, the Rhine.

I suggest that we understand the push for an armistice initiative not as some devious deception but as a reflection of the severe disorientation that came with the intermittent recognition of personal failure and imminent military disaster—magnified by the fear of being thrown into a rout. In this situation, ideas and images of a war *à outrance* [to the last], a popular mobilization

<sup>66</sup> Ernst von Eisenhart-Rothe, *Im Banne der Persönlichkeit: Aus den Lebenserinnerungen des Generals der Infanterie a. D.* (Berlin, 1931), pp. 122–23.

<sup>67</sup> Tieschowitz, BA-MA W-10/50 726, p. 17.

[*levée en masse*] or insurrection [*Volksaufstand*], a people's war [*Volkskrieg*] came to flourish. As the comment of Eisenhart-Rothe suggests, this is the language of the free-fall into defeat. It is the language of October 1918.

#### TERMS OF HONOR

The missing piece in the story—either of descent into German capitulation to Allied demands (Ritter) or the ascent to popular sovereignty and democracy (Wehler)—is the political debate on armed resistance to defend the fatherland. This was the major choice to be made in October 1918—and only when the option of war for national defense in all its articulations was rejected did revolution and defeat take their course.

There were three distinct projects for a continuation of war competing with each other, each with its own agenda and its own conflicting stances. The political process was torn among the alternatives of (1) merely simulating national defense in order to fool a defeated nation into accepting peace without revolution, (2) the call for a *levée en masse* to fight for the integrity of the nation, and (3) the insistence on a terminal battle [*Endkampf*] to salvage the honor of the German army. One might add that a fourth alternative was clearly present, but it did not enter the governmental debates. This was the idea and agenda of a *Rechtsfrieden*, the pursuit of a European order based on a human rights or, more appropriately, a *ius gentium* [*Völkerrecht*] regime.<sup>68</sup> In other words, the recognition of defeat threw up in rapid succession basic alternatives of what Germany could be and what it might become. October 1918 was a phantasmagoric moment in which the extremes of twentieth-century German existence were touched in a month-long controversy over how to end the war.

The first initiative to call up a *levée en masse* came from rather unexpected quarters, namely, from the former admiral turned foreign minister Paul von Hintze.<sup>69</sup> He had come to Spa on September 28 in order to present a plan for “the defense of the fatherland,” which he had been pushed to develop by key staff officers in the Supreme Command who desperately wanted Ludendorff to abandon his resistance against putting forward a peace initiative.<sup>70</sup> The chal-

<sup>68</sup> Wilhelm Ribhegge, *Frieden für Europa: Die Politik der deutschen Reichstagsmehrheit, 1917–18* (Essen, 1988). The idea of the *ius gentium* as the basis for a new European order will require separate study. It is surely as important (although not as politically prominent) as the notion of a *levée en masse*.

<sup>69</sup> Paul von Hintze came into office on July 9 and was replaced by Wilhelm Solf on October 4. On Hintze's plan, see “Aufzeichnung des Auswärtigen Amtes, 28. September 1918,” in *Amtliche Urkunden* (n. 56 above), p. 47, and UA 4/2, 405–6.

<sup>70</sup> Johannes Hürter, ed., *Paul von Hintze, Marineoffizier, Diplomat, Staatssekretär: Dokumente einer Karriere zwischen Militär und Politik, 1903–1918* (Munich, 1998), pp. 103–7; Ritter (n. 7 above), p. 415, considers the event an unprecedented palace revolution of staff officers.

lenge of German politics, Hintze argued, was “to facilitate the transition from victory to defeat,” which would otherwise create a “shock that empire and monarchy might not survive.”<sup>71</sup> The example of Russia was clearly on his mind. German defeat was no longer even at issue; it was a fact one had to work with. But the transition into defeat needed political staging, if it were not to end in disaster—the nightmare of a “revolution from below.”<sup>72</sup> Hintze proposed, instead, to launch a “revolution from above.”<sup>73</sup>

Wording and timing matter here. The idea of a “revolution from above” came straight from a Foreign Office memorandum that advised gathering “the forces of the nation on the broadest possible national basis in order to make them usable for the defense of the fatherland.”<sup>74</sup> This rhetoric of national purpose [*Sammlung*] can be traced back to August 1914. It was what Hintze set out to present in Spa. In essence, it was a plan to salvage the monarchy that endorsed an opening to the parliamentary majority and overtures to the American president. Prepped by his staff, Ludendorff made this plan his own in requesting an armistice initiative.<sup>75</sup> Under the impact of Ludendorff’s confession about the instant threat of annihilation, however, Hintze’s own stance underwent spontaneous mutation during the war council of September 29. Literally overnight the imperial official turned into a Prussian nationalist, now calling not simply for a national unity government but also for “the gathering of all forces of the nation for defense in the final battle [*Endkampf*]”—issuing the incendiary call for a *Volkskrieg* or “people’s war.” He now wanted “to put the last man onto the front” under the “battle-cry . . . ‘The Fatherland is in danger.’”<sup>76</sup> The threat of impending catastrophe shook Hintze out of one identity into a thoroughly different one.

Still, Hintze remained the consummate Wilhelmine official. He tapped into a powerful rhetoric but also feared the consequences. Rather than the new, inclusive government being parliamentary, it was only *to appear* parliamentary;<sup>77</sup> and, rather than calling for a people’s war, the new government was to act *as if* the people were ready to fight: “The purpose is to generate *an atmosphere* at home and to convey this sentiment to the enemies, as *if* the Ger-

<sup>71</sup> UA 4/2, 401.

<sup>72</sup> Much of the candor of Hintze’s assessment comes from his postwar testimony (which is to be taken with a grain of salt, because at this point he was embroiled in nasty catcalls with Ludendorff). See *ibid.*, 386–415.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 401, 406.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum, signed by Rosenberg, Bergen, Stumm, September 28, 1918, in *Amtliche Urkunden*, p. 47. See Hürter, pp. 103–5, 639–40 (doc. 239).

<sup>75</sup> Hürter, pp. 640–42 (doc. 240) and 643 (doc. 241). It is interesting to contemplate that Hintze was the only one to bring suggestions as to what to do to the war council.

<sup>76</sup> UA 4/2, 406.

<sup>77</sup> Hintze speaks explicitly of a “democratic facade”—and he meant it. Hence associating him with parliamentarization is a rather dubious proposition. Hürter, p. 666 (doc. 254).

man people—in a summons to each and every one to dedicate their abilities and their lives to the deliverance of the fatherland—*were united and would want to act accordingly [das tun wolle und werde]*.”<sup>78</sup> Hintze wanted the “*appearance and sound* of a united front of the German people, prepared to die rather than accept a dishonorable and unbearable peace” in order to finesse his way out of a revolution at home and to deceive the Allies abroad. His preferred option in the face of catastrophe was to simulate a people’s war.

That he spontaneously came to propose a people’s war and that he did not want to act on it are of equal importance. In the first place, it is striking how self-evident the rhetoric of a people’s war, of raising the nation for defense, appeared to Hintze. Obviously, the idea of popular insurrection was part of a cultural and political inventory that was readily available. As if in a flashback, we see memories of a myth of Prussian salvation—memories and images of the war against Napoleon—appear amid the official diction. But, at the same time, Hintze considered it “an illusion that the German people would go down in an honorable last stand.”<sup>79</sup> Nor did he really want the people to rise—because this would have amounted to the revolution that he wanted to avert in the first place. The fear of revolution outweighed the desire for desperate action. The result was a game of smoke and mirrors that was meant to deceive both the enemy and the nation. Hintze’s plan is an indication of the impasse of imperial officialdom, caught between the recognition of German defeat and the fear of revolution.

In contrast, Prince Max von Baden wanted to become chancellor of national salvation in order to rescue Germany from a French invasion, although he thought, unsurprisingly for a Badish prince, of achieving the end by French rather than Prussian means. Max von Baden had emerged as a surprise candidate for the chancellorship. But he fit the newly coined politics of an “instant armistice” only very uneasily. Above all, he wanted to save his southern German patrimony, Baden, from invasion and revolution and had convinced himself—he had thought differently only a year earlier—that representative government and the legitimation of the monarchical principle combined had the power and the ability to mobilize people even at this point in the war, provided that such an initiative was linked to an unequivocal (that is, nonannexationist) call for peace and aimed at preserving the integrity of the nation. He thought that a broadly based national government in solidarity with the ruling houses of Germany stood a chance to rouse the nation and, if it came to it, to withstand an invasion. But he wanted peace rather than war. With a national defense against invasion called up, he hoped to negotiate with the Allies for a mutually agreeable peace.

Max von Baden came to the chancellorship with an emphatic notion of

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 406 (my italics).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. (my italics).

preparing a regime of national defense or, as Roedern called it, *défense nationale*.<sup>80</sup> In his assessment of the military situation he relied for the most part on Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, the commander in chief of one of the three German armies on the western front—the one that held the northern sector of the front facing mainly British and Commonwealth forces. Rupprecht was an astute and active commander in chief who also proved to be very clear-headed. He had been exceedingly skeptical about Ludendorff's grand spring offensive and, ever since early summer 1918, he insisted that Germany had to come to an armistice and to a peace, because it was the only chance for Germany to survive reasonably intact.<sup>81</sup> In the fall, he did not consider a *levée* feasible. *Levées*, he argued, were imaginable at the beginning but not at the end of wars. Max accepted Rupprecht's military assessments but disagreed with him on the remedy.<sup>82</sup> For Max, this was a beginning, even a new era of German warfare. He had become a supporter of parliamentarization because he had arrived at the conclusion that nothing but the nation could and would salvage Germany. If the nation rather than armies were mobilized for a defensive stand, Germany like France would prove invincible, peace could be obtained through negotiation, invasion averted, and dignity preserved.

Rupprecht may well have been right. This may well have been a pipe dream. However, the chancellor's perspective was widely shared in political circles in Berlin and among German liberal elites. It was supported by a majority of the Reichstag, although by the end of October things had changed and the idea was abandoned by all parties concerned, including Max von Baden himself. In late September, though, the alliance of majority parties in the Reichstag, the

<sup>80</sup> The English literature on Max von Baden is exceedingly scarce. See Klaus Epstein, "Wrong Man in the Maelstrom: The Government of Max von Baden," *Review of Politics* 26, no. 2 (1962): 215–43. His connections to the "ethical imperialism" movement (which also informed his stand on peace) have recently resurfaced in Eberhard Demm, "Kurt Hahn's Memorandum on the Subject of Ethical Imperialism 1918," *War in History* 5, no. 1 (1998): 84–120. The basic source is still Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above).

<sup>81</sup> There is no significant historiography on this both politically and militarily astute Bavarian prince. See Kurt Sendtner, *Rupprecht von Wittelsbach, Kronprinz von Bayern* (Munich, 1954) for key documents; and see his war diary (Rupprecht, Kronprinz von Bayern, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, ed. Eugen von Frauenholz, 3 vols. [Munich, 1929]). On the necessity of immediate peace negotiations, see Rupprecht's letter to Max von Baden, August 15, 1918, in Max von Baden (n. 40 above), pp. 288–89.

<sup>82</sup> On October 18, Rupprecht wrote to Max again: "Perhaps you are interested to hear something about the military situation. Our soldiers are overtired and have suffered horrendous losses. I do not expect very much for a 'levée en masse' following Carnot's example at the beginning of the French revolutionary wars. The levée was so successful, because it occurred at the beginning of the war, but we are in our fifth year of war and our reserves are exhausted to the limit. . . . Ludendorff does not recognize the entire seriousness of the situation. We must come to a peace under all circumstances, before the enemy forces its way into Germany; or woe is us." Max von Baden, pp. 466–67.

so-called *Interfraktionelle Ausschuß*,<sup>83</sup> had agreed to constitute a “strong . . . government for the organization of national defense and the pursuit of a compromise peace [*Verständigungsfrieden*].”<sup>84</sup> Max von Baden’s recollection that “again and again the words ‘Ministry of National Defense’ come up” in discussions concerning the formation of “his” government is quite to the point.<sup>85</sup> The draft of a memorandum of the majority parties insisted that “German’s ability to defend itself is insurmountable, provided all popular forces are put at the service of an unequivocal political idea. Only the recognition of the insurmountable obstacle of popular resistance will bring the enemy to negotiations and secure for us the benefits of a negotiated peace [*Verständigungsfrieden*].”<sup>86</sup>

The majority parties tied the quest for a compromise peace to the idea that only parliament could mobilize the necessary people’s power [*Volkskraft*] to achieve a negotiated settlement. They were surely not so naive as to think that the Allies would simply yield if Germany abandoned its war aims. But they expected that the French and British peace factions would assert themselves if they faced a united Germany roused to defend national integrity. As keenly as the majority parties were aware of the state of popular exhaustion and the profound war-weariness of the German people, they were prepared, entering the first quasi-parliamentary government, “to do the utmost [*das letzte daran setzen*] to defend the vital interests [*gebotene Lebensinteressen*] of the nation and the population,” as the Social Democratic party leader Friedrich Ebert put it.<sup>87</sup> Even Philipp Scheidemann, one of the more skeptical Social Democrats with his ear close to the ground, could be found demanding the organization of a national defense (if a just and equitable peace were not to be had) in a lead article in the Social Democratic *Vorwärts*.<sup>88</sup> The bottom line was that the

<sup>83</sup> Historiography (such as Manfred Rauh, *Die Parlamentarisierung des Deutschen Reiches* [Düsseldorf, 1977]) debates the issue of parliamentarization, but tends to overlook the link between parliamentarization and “the erection of a German defensive wall.” Especially in view of the worsening military situation, the *Interfraktionelle Ausschuß* insisted that defense is no longer a military but a “political-moral issue.” Erich Matthias and Rudolf Morsey, eds., *Der Interfraktionelle Ausschuß 1917/1918*, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf, 1959), 2:653.

<sup>84</sup> Conrad Haußmann, *Schlaglichter: Reichstagsbriefe und Aufzeichnungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1924), pp. 227–28.

<sup>85</sup> Max von Baden, pp. 319–20.

<sup>86</sup> Matthias and Morsey, *Der Interfraktioneller Ausschuß*, p. 653.

<sup>87</sup> Friedrich Ebert is quoted in “Die sozialdemokratischen Forderungen,” *Vossische Zeitung* 489 (September 24, 1918). “We will now have to organize the national defense, as long as peace cannot be had”; quoted in Wilhelm Stahl, ed., *Schulthess’ Europäischer Geschichtskalender 34 (1918)* (Munich, 1922), p. 292 (SPD directory meeting, September 23, 1918).

<sup>88</sup> Philipp Scheidemann, *Vorwärts* (September 24, 1918). Needless to say, Scheidemann preferred to forget this and similar articles, and a sympathetic historiography has



parliamentary majority had talked themselves into thinking not only that they could do a better job in governing Germany but also that by doing their job well they could deliver success, a peace in which Germany would quite naturally assume equality—and perhaps even a bit more than that—among the warring nations. They had convinced themselves that they were destined to save Germany and would thus prove the viability of parliamentary government.<sup>89</sup>

There is good reason why this is not the way they wanted things to appear in hindsight, but the conjuncture of reasons itself is telling. The Social Democrats in particular had made clear from the start that they would fight for Germany but not for the autocratic system or for Wilhelm II.<sup>90</sup> Ironically, the reactionary end of the political spectrum was at this point (August and September) far more eager than the Social Democrats to replace Wilhelm, because they wanted to salvage the autocratic system against parliamentarization and really aimed at a military dictatorship.<sup>91</sup> However, by the end of October, with parliamentarization under way and the abdication of Wilhelm II at issue, conservatives and reactionaries closed ranks in support of the kaiser, at which point the Social Democrats and the Catholic Center Party preferred to forget that they had ever supported a further continuation of war.<sup>92</sup> In the course of October, they had become increasingly weary—and if anything they were

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not picked up on them either—which has suited the stab-in-the back historiography well.

<sup>89</sup> Their problem was a Prussian-Imperial German regime that would not yield or budge. But opposing the regime did not entail abandoning a very strong sense of national integrity. The conflation of opposition to Prussia and monarchism with defeatism constitutes part of the stab-in-the-back legend. See Otto Ebenau, *In der Strafsache gegen Prinz Max von Baden und fünf Genossen wegen Hochverrats* (Munich, 1921). August Keim, *Prinz Max von Baden und das Kriegskabinett, Reichsverderber*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1922).

<sup>90</sup> A typical statement: “Prince Max von Baden has emphasized in his speech to the Reichstag that Germany was ready for peace, but that it would not shy away from national defense, the mobilization of all forces of the people, if the conditions of the victors [*sic*] for our people were intolerable. One would expect that Prince Max was not of the opinion that we only continue war, because Wilhelm II wants to continue to be kaiser. The highest enthusiasm, the sacrifice of the last drop of blood and possession cannot be demanded from every single man or woman, in order to preserve Wilhelm II as emperor. . . . The German working class cannot sacrifice the future of the fatherland in order to salvage any one of the Hohenzollern. Wilhelm II has not done enough for the German people so that they might be ready to sacrifice themselves for him.” *Fränkische Tagespost* (October 25, 1918); quoted in Adolf Sturzenberger, *Die Abdankung Kaiser Wilhelms II: Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der Kaiserfrage und die Haltung der Presse* (Berlin, 1937), p. 86.

<sup>91</sup> Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 1916–1918* (New York, 1976).

<sup>92</sup> See below, p. 507.

certain that they could not rouse the nation with Wilhelm at the helm. In October 1918, two or three weeks made all the difference in the world.

The parliamentarian and, in October 1918, the state secretary most dedicated to a national mobilization was the dyed-in-the-wool liberal republican from Württemberg, Conrad Haussmann. He, together with his more cautious fellow-countryman, the vice chancellor Friedrich von Payer, and a young captain in the War Ministry by the curious name of Colin Ross, was the heart and soul of the effort to mobilize a national defense. The spirit of the entire initiative is best captured in one of his drafts for a national appeal:

We have starved, suffered want, and fought. We could not force victory against the superior force of the enemy, but we have achieved liberty at home. Much has been achieved. Greater things are yet to come. Germany is on its way to becoming the freest nation of the world.

. . . The last man will go to the front and the last woman to the workbench. Onward German people, defend yourself and your young freedom. We are in for a fight that is as just and sacred as any nation has ever fought. War weariness is a burden on other peoples as well. Now they are the ones who moan under their chauvinist rulers. They will recognize, in the newly found resistance of our regiments which throw themselves against the enemy of their own free will, that a free people that fights for its life is invincible.<sup>93</sup>

Max von Baden set out in no uncertain terms to launch a government of national defense along the lines Haussmann indicated. He asserted, in the draft for his maiden speech before the Reichstag, that it might yet come to the point that “the German people would be called to bring into action their devotion and voluntary spirit in order to fight a battle over life and death.”<sup>94</sup> However, he was stopped cold and his draft speech suppressed when the Supreme Command and the Foreign Office warned the new chancellor that he was heading for military disaster if he did not stop making belligerent noises and go along with the armistice initiative.<sup>95</sup> The irony of the situation in the first days of October is that, while Ludendorff was mortified by the threat of an imminent collapse of the imperial field army and the Foreign Office was dissimulating,

<sup>93</sup> This particular draft was written on October 19 and, together with the ones emanating from the War Ministry (Captain Colin Ross), deserves a more detailed analysis for its mixture of radical republicanism, racism, and totalitarianism. The point here is that this draft reflected an attitude dating back into summer 1918 that was central to the formation of the new government: that domestic liberty was worth fighting for and that the latter was now threatened by the chauvinism of the enemy. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (henceforth HStA), Nachlass Conrad Haußmann Q1/2/17.

<sup>94</sup> Max von Baden (n. 40 above), p. 366.

<sup>95</sup> Typically, this issue has not been the subject of historical analysis. See *ibid.*, pp. 356–59. Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), pp. 65–82, esp. pp. 77–82.

the parliamentarians in Berlin and a chancellor who was generally regarded as weak were poised to raise the nation in defense of the integrity of the German lands and in order to avert “national humiliation.”<sup>96</sup> The irony is compounded by the fact that the kind of government that the American president wanted to see installed in Germany was the only one, at this point, ready to fight—for peace, to be sure, but to fight all the same. If nothing came of the desire to install a parliamentary regime of national defense in early October, it was due to the Supreme Command, which wanted to conclude an “instant armistice” and was desperate enough to suppress the faintest trace of national self-assertion in order to avert the breakdown of the imperial field army.

Here, Rathenau intervened in an act of high drama.<sup>97</sup> He was stewing over the formation of the new government and the news about the Supreme Command’s armistice initiative. He insisted that the desperate military situation demanded a radical departure from older practices. “Time Is of the Essence [*Die Stunde drängt*],” he called a first unpublished piece, which urged that “[p]opular resistance, a national defense, the insurrection of the masses is to be organized. Not for the purpose of annexation, not for the purpose of prolonging the war, but for peace. For a dignified peace.”<sup>98</sup> The statement circulated widely among Berlin elites. It entered Cabinet deliberations on October 6, when it was introduced as Rathenau’s call for a *levée en masse* by Finance Minister Roedern.<sup>99</sup> A day later, on October 7, Rathenau’s demand for popular insurrection appeared in the right-of-center bourgeois paper, *Vossische Zeitung*, under the title “A Black Day.”<sup>100</sup> Rathenau continued to defend his position taken in September and October into January 1919, when he published a brief essay, “The Darkest Hour.”<sup>101</sup> He then argued that, if only a *levée* had been called in October, a cease-fire would have been achieved sooner and would have prevented both the collapse of the home front and the revolution. It is not as if his call for a *levée en masse* had been a passing fancy. It was an expression of deeply held beliefs applied to a desperate moment with the kind

<sup>96</sup> Max von Baden, p. 367.

<sup>97</sup> A useful discussion of the situation is Ernst Schulin, *Walther Rathenau: Repräsentant, Kritiker und Opfer seiner Zeit* (Göttingen, 1979), pp. 85–95.

<sup>98</sup> Walther Rathenau, “Die Stunde drängt,” in *Politische Schriften*, ed. Walther Rathenau (Berlin, 1928), pp. 68–69, here p. 69.

<sup>99</sup> Gerhard Hecker, *Walther Rathenau und sein Verhältnis zu Militär und Krieg* (Boppard am Rhein, 1983), pp. 428–44.

<sup>100</sup> Walther Rathenau, “Ein dunkler Tag” (n. 1 above), 6:258–61 (henceforth cited as “Tag”). The proclamation had previously been rejected by the liberal *Berliner Zeitung*. Ernst Troeltsch refused to cosign it.

<sup>101</sup> Walther Rathenau, “Die dunkelste Stunde,” *Die Zukunft* 27/14 (1919): 50–54 (henceforth cited as “Stunde”).

of unflinching verbal and mental radicalism that was typical of Walther Rathenau.<sup>102</sup>

The excitement over Rathenau's outburst largely focused on his public attack on Ludendorff. The military may capitulate if it must, Rathenau insisted, but diplomacy cannot negotiate capitulation for the military. Germany's "black day" had come when Ludendorff lost not only his composure but also a sense of responsibility. The solution was unequivocal: "Those who lost their nerve must be replaced. [*Wer die Nerven verloren hat, muß ersetzt werden*]." Schulenburg had expressed much the same view but was not (yet) in the habit of publishing in newspapers. Ludendorff, though, was not the only victim of Rathenau's outburst in favor of popular insurrection or, as he alternatively called it, "people's war" and "mass insurrection." He was ready to overturn the entire order of things in Wilhelmine Germany. Popular insurrection entailed a call for national defense that was "frank and truthful"—which was to say that it should come "not from army bullies, naval enthusiasts, or movie producers; not in the old language, but in a new one."<sup>103</sup> It required volunteers rather than an extension of conscription and auxiliary service and so was a slap in the face of the Prussian War Ministry. And it demanded a total mobilization of resources, for, in Rathenau's view, "the country is [still] unexhausted."<sup>104</sup> Questionable as this view was, he added that such mobilization was not going to happen with a mere "parliamentarization of the administrative state."<sup>105</sup> He did not believe that parliamentarization would solve the problem. It goes without saying that Rathenau's insistence on combing through factories, bureaucracies, and public spaces for additional manpower did not exactly endear him to the masses either. Despite all the shared sentiment and symbolism of the appeal for national defense, it was stunningly bad politics.

If Rathenau's plan deserves our attention, it is not just because he pushed the issue of popular insurrection onto the political stage and into the public realm. His initiative also entailed elements of political and military thought that had far-ranging implications for the way war was conceived at this crucial juncture. It is often asserted that he imitated either Léon Gambetta or the Prussian reformers or both.<sup>106</sup> But the historical allusions in Rathenau's pieces

<sup>102</sup> See Thomas Rohkrämer, *Eine andere Moderne? Zivilisationskritik, Natur und Technik in Deutschland, 1880–1933* (Paderborn, 1999).

<sup>103</sup> Rathenau, "Die Stunde drängt," p. 68.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 68. "Insurrection in national defense is the duty. The country is unexhausted. Not all forces, not all hearts are at the front. Cities, railway stations, offices, rears are full of people, field-grey and city-grey." See also Walther Rathenau, "Festigkeit" (September 30, 1918) in *Politische Aufsätze*, ed. Walther Rathenau (Berlin, 1928), pp. 63–67: "Wir halten den Krieg beliebig lange aus . . ." (p. 64).

<sup>105</sup> Rathenau, "Die Stunde drängt," p. 68.

<sup>106</sup> Hecker, *Rathenau*, pp. 435–36.

remained surprisingly weak. He was less concerned with history than with thinking of war as a distinctly twentieth-century marriage of popular will and technocracy. That is to say, while Rathenau as a matter of course knew of and likely cherished Gambetta's role in 1870–71 in mobilizing the French nation-in-arms, his call for popular insurrection had an agenda and a genealogy all its own, despite its traditional veneer.<sup>107</sup> It deserves a closer reading because it begins in one place but ends in another one in a swooping arc of thought, punctuated by all sorts of invective, and ending in a full-fledged articulation of the basic principle of totalitarian warfare.

According to Rathenau, voluntarism was key to the mobilization of people's power [*Volkskraft*]. Subaltern subjects could be pressed into service, but citizens were ready to give their all only if and when their "will to self-assertion and self-determination in liberty" was rallied.<sup>108</sup> It followed that the spirit of voluntarism could not be had for war aims such as "the usurpation of global hegemony" and, surely, could not be aroused by implanting a "barren and superannuated militarism and feudalism among the new [*erstarkten*] nations of the world."<sup>109</sup> Rather than fighting for territory or material gain, free citizens fought for values they held dear. Popular insurrection, as Rathenau envisioned it, was above all war for self-government and self-determination, for "liberty." People's war was emphatically national or nationalizing war. These wars based on a *levée en masse* were fought for subjective or emotional war aims such as dignity or integrity. Among them, survival, and its prerequisites, "the ability to work" and the right to "living space" [*Lebensraum*], were key because they were the foundations of self-determination. All modern war, he insisted, was thus ideological war or, as he called it, *Gesinnungskrieg*. The latter was never simply war over cultural idioms or ideology, but war over identity and its material prerequisites.<sup>110</sup> This was the kind of war, Rathenau insisted, that the Germans should have fought all along—instead of pursuing the war aims of special interests that appealed to greed but not national sentiment. A war on behalf of the collective will for the survival of the nation was the only war—and this is the key to Rathenau's scheme of popular insurrection—the nation would still fight in 1918.

Based on voluntarism, popular insurrections always also entailed a dramatic increase in state power, which is what he was driving at all along. People's

<sup>107</sup> Colmar von der Goltz, *Leon Gambetta und seine Armeen* (Berlin, 1877), and *Das Volk in Waffen: Ein Buch über Heerwesen und Kriegführung unserer Zeit*, 5th ed. (Berlin, 1899).

<sup>108</sup> Rathenau, "Tag." See also Walther Rathenau, "Staat und Vaterland," in *Nach der Flut*, ed. Walther Rathenau (Berlin, 1919), pp. 34–48.

<sup>109</sup> Rathenau, "Tag."

<sup>110</sup> On Rathenau's ideas about a future war as *Gesinnungskrieg* (war of ideology), see Walther Rathenau, *Zeitliches* (Berlin, 1919), pp. 71–82.

war could only be marshaled by a strong state. Rathenau demanded the creation of a civilian *Verteidigungsamt* [Ministry of Defense] with far-reaching powers. It was commonly rumored that this ministry was tailored to fit Rathenau's own ambitions to mastermind the German war effort. However that may be, it fit his notion of governance in a democratic age or, as he called it, in a people's state [*Volksstaat*], in contradistinction to the Wilhelmine class- and caste-state.<sup>111</sup> He reasoned that inasmuch as the people ruled, they ruled over themselves. And since the people ruled over themselves, the effect of democratic self-determination consisted above all in "the overwhelming strengthening of the state in relation to the individual will." Nobody rules the people more totally than the people themselves, he concluded, bringing his arc of thought on popular insurrection to its conclusion. A people's state thrives both on the state's "surplus of power" [*Machtfülle*] and on the "devotion" [*Hingabe*] of individuals.<sup>112</sup> The combination of state power and popular devotion is the very signature of the people's state fighting a people's war. Insurrectionary war is thus a violent *plebiscite de tous les jours* orchestrated by the state as an expression of popular will. In sum, voluntarism strengthened state power, creating a modern-day Behemoth against which imperial powers and a superannuated militarism were no match. If empire fought against empire, Germany was lost because it had no empire. But if Germany fought as a people's state, it was invincible. In the classic sense of the word, Rathenau's call for people's war was totalitarian.<sup>113</sup>

Rathenau's initiative came to naught. Two days after its publication, on October 9, Max von Baden presented Ludendorff with a questionnaire for a cabinet meeting, attempting to elicit suggestions on how to continue the war and possibly nail down Ludendorff on the issue of national defense. Among other things he asked whether the "*levée en masse* . . . as it has been proposed by Rathenau in the *Vossische Zeitung*" provided a "sufficient improvement of forces." Ludendorff's answer was unequivocal. "No. I do not expect anything from a *levée en masse*. . . . The *levée en masse* would destroy more than one can tolerate."<sup>114</sup> This apodictic rejection was not the end of deliberations about national defense, but it nipped in the bud further discussion of a German *levée en masse* in cabinet. The Supreme Command still wanted to avoid anything that could jeopardize the armistice—and surely did not want the civilians in

<sup>111</sup> Paul Letourneau, *Walther Rathenau ou le rêve prométhéen: Pensée politique et économique (1867–1922)* (Quebec, 1987).

<sup>112</sup> Walther Rathenau, *Von kommenden Dingen*, ed. Hans Dieter Hellige and Ernst Schulin, vol. 2: *Hauptwerke und Gespräche*, pp. 297–497, *Walther Rathenau—Gesamtausgabe* (Munich and Heidelberg, 1977), p. 465.

<sup>113</sup> Jacob Leib Talmon, *The History of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1952).

<sup>114</sup> Ludendorff, *Urkunden* (n. 42 above), pp. 547–48. The minutes of the meeting with Ludendorff mention a second point but do not explain it.



Berlin and, for that matter, the most German of German Jews to organize national defense.<sup>115</sup> In the end, Rathenau's initiative was too republican for the military and too warlike for the republicans.<sup>116</sup>

Rathenau himself stuck to his idea well into 1919, but he cut his losses. Within little more than a week after the call for popular insurrection he demanded the planned demobilization of Germany along much the same lines.<sup>117</sup> He was enough of a calculating grand bourgeois to realize that, if defeat could not be averted, revolution was imminent. And if a *levée* could not be raised, one could at least bring the army back home without causing a revolution. In fact, however genuine the desire to defend the fatherland, Rathenau's call for popular insurrection was also an attempt to avert domestic disaster—"civil war, military coup, and food strike."<sup>118</sup>

Some members of Max von Baden's cabinet quickly expressed their "suspicion that in the end the Supreme Command would yet come out in favor of the Rathenau ideas" after the cabinet meeting of October 9.<sup>119</sup> They feared that the Supreme Command's refusal to countenance Rathenau's initiative was a trap for the governing parliamentary majority. Their suspicion proved correct, but only after the fact. Ludendorff and consorts emerged as the defenders of the nation only after defeat, in the Weimar Republic and above all in its courtrooms. The position of conservative pressure groups and parties and, especially, of the emergent radical nationalist Right in October 1918 is on all counts the most difficult to assess. They would seem to be the natural champions of people's war and eventually came to claim the mantle of "people's war" for themselves. But when it counted, in October 1918, they were not a force to

<sup>115</sup> Lothar Burchardt, "Walther Rathenau und die Ursprünge deutsche Rohstoffbewirtschaftung im Ersten Weltkrieg," *Tradition* 15, no. 4 (1970): 169–96.

<sup>116</sup> With the revolution, Rathenau was accused of being a *Kriegsverlängerer*. Harry Graf Kessler, *Walther Rathenau: Sein Leben und sein Werk* (Berlin, 1928), p. 267.

<sup>117</sup> This remarkable turnabout rankles Wolfgang Kruse, "Kriegswirtschaft und Gesellschaftsvision: Walther Rathenau und die Organisierung des Kapitalismus," in *Walther Rathenau, 1867/1922: Die Extreme berühren sich*, ed. Hans Wilderotter (Berlin, [1993]), pp. 151–68. But it is perfectly consistent with the *Volksstaat* ideal (which very clearly was conceived as a revolution to overcome the revolution). Letter to Heinrich Scheuch, October 15, 1918 and letter to Erzberger, October 26, 1918; Walther Rathenau, *Politische Briefe* (Dresden, 1929), pp. 195–200 and 205–13. Rathenau maintained his *levée* posture and veered, at least rhetorically, to the radical Right when writing on October 17 that "we would rather fight in order to go down in defense of the honor of our people." Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, ed., *Walther Rathenau: Tagebuch, 1907–1922* (Düsseldorf, 1967), pp. 227–29.

<sup>118</sup> Rathenau suggested that all three would happen as a result of the "dissolution of the front"—a rather shrewd analysis. Letter to Maximilian Harden, October 8, 1918; Hans Dieter Hellge, ed., *Walther Rathenau–Maximilian Harden: Briefwechsel, 1897–1920* (Munich and Heidelberg, 1983), p. 750.

<sup>119</sup> Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), p. 127 (meeting of the Cabinet). Solf and Roedern were the staunchest supporters of the *levée* in the Cabinet.



be reckoned with. To be sure, there were endless appeals, especially in the conservative press, that everything, anything should be done to avert defeat.<sup>120</sup> However, the conservative press was caught in a dilemma. It had always maintained that the Allies were out to annihilate Germany. But the call for people's war in the spirit of Prussian nationalism would only work, if its supporters acknowledged the impending or actual defeat of the imperial army, which Ludendorff and the entire Right wanted to avoid at all costs. As a result, they were stunned, disoriented, and close to panic. They exhibited the behavior that Ludendorff attributed to the parliamentary majority.

Only when defeat could be displaced onto a rejection of President Wilson's (and, later on, Allied) armistice demands did the rally of conservative and radical nationalist groups gain steam.<sup>121</sup> By the end of October, when all was lost, they came out with banners and trumpets demanding, with great emotion—in defense of monarchy or in pursuit of a Greater Germany in the east—national mobilization and a people's war. Even then, though, conservative groups never got around what one might call their Wilhelmine complacency. When they demanded a call to arms, they appealed to the state to mobilize the German people, whom they seemed to perceive as everybody but themselves.<sup>122</sup> They proceeded to produce petitions galore but no action whatsoever. Although ethnic tensions heated up in the eastern provinces and some self-defense associations sprang up, the majority on the Right still looked for the authorities to bail them out. This mind-set changed only in early November with the crumbling and subsequent collapse of the state that had maintained them and with the defeat of the army that had acted for them. The revolution and the peace settlement finally galvanized the more radically nationalist elements and cast them adrift from their monarchical (and, for that matter, Prussian) moorings. By the mid-twenties the radical nationalists had convinced themselves that they had invented the idea of popular insurrection and pursued it all along.<sup>123</sup>

The common denominator of conservative and radical nationalist petitions

<sup>120</sup> Sturzenberger (n. 90 above), pp. 48–78. Karin Herrmann, "Der Zusammenbruch 1918 in der deutschen Tagespresse. Politische Ziele, Reaktionen und Ereignisse und die Versuchung der Meinungsführung, 23. September bis 11. November 1918" (Ph.D. diss., University of Münster, 1958).

<sup>121</sup> Heinz Hagenlücke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei: Die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreiches* (Düsseldorf, 1997); James Retallack, *Notables of the Right: The Conservative Party and Political Mobilization in Germany, 1876–1918* (Boston, 1988).

<sup>122</sup> See the October 5 statement of the Deutsche Vaterlandspartei: It is the "sacred duty" to do everything in order "to bring the German people to the recognition of the dangers that are threatening them and, if necessary, to entice them to the strongest possible resistance against the enemy." Karl Wortmann, *Geschichte der Deutschen Vaterlandspartei* (Halle, 1926), p. 59.

<sup>123</sup> Anneliese Thimme, *Flucht in den Mythos: Die deutschnationale Volkspartei und die Niederlage von 1918* (Göttingen, 1969).

in mid- to late October was the notion of a terminal battle, or *Endkampf*.<sup>124</sup> It remains unclear when and where the idea of a terminal battle first surfaced in 1918. Hintze had mentioned it on September 29. Eisenhart-Rothe had talked to Ludendorff about a “battle unto annihilation.”<sup>125</sup> Even Max von Baden alluded to it.<sup>126</sup> It was invoked by the newly formed Vaterlandspartei.<sup>127</sup> But throughout the first half of October both the Supreme Command and the War Ministry were embarrassed by the civilian pressure for a national call to arms without an equivalent measure of their own. However, beyond the pledge to continue fighting “to the end,” the majority of propositions remained mired in a late Wilhelminian mindset and caught in the contradictions that had plagued Hintze’s action plan from late September.

The same, however, cannot be said about military preparations for an *Endkampf* both in the War Ministry and in the Supreme Command. There, Ludendorff’s acknowledgment of defeat on September 29 jolted staffs into a rash of activities that profoundly changed the German military’s outlook on war and warfare. None of these intramilitary initiatives were realized in 1918, but they opened new horizons. While it is beyond the purview of this essay to prove the point, there is considerable evidence and good reason to believe that the foundations for the war of annihilation that was fought between 1941 and 1945 were laid then and there.<sup>128</sup> It must suffice here to elaborate, albeit briefly, two of the three domains where this radicalization of warfare occurred. A third arena of radicalization, *Bandenkampf* in the eastern occupied areas (war against insurrectionary nationalist and bolshevik groups or so-called “criminal” gangs, which were often enough displaced people who reclaimed their former possessions), can only be mentioned.<sup>129</sup>

Throughout the first half of October, both the Supreme Command and the Prussian War Ministry were embarrassed at being caught by the civilian pressure for a national call to arms without an equivalent measure of their own. However, the raw emotions of the civilian response to defeat pushed the two

<sup>124</sup> A good sample of these calls for national insurrection and *Endkampf* can be found in Bundesarchiv Berlin, Stellvertreter des Reichskanzlers Friedrich von Payer, R703/74: Stellungnahmen und Eingaben zur “Vaterlandsverteidigung.”

<sup>125</sup> See above, p. 474.

<sup>126</sup> Max von Baden (n. 40 above), p. 331, speaks of the “determination to fight to death.”

<sup>127</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *Deutsche Ohnmachtspolitik im Weltkrieg*, 2 vols. (Hamburg and Berlin, 1926), 2:616–23.

<sup>128</sup> In the following I have abstained from references to World War II; the connections and linkages are almost too overwhelming. The sole purpose here is to establish incipient practice at the end of World War I.

<sup>129</sup> A first discussion of this subject is Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, Mass., and New York, 2000).

military institutions out of a standoff in their long bureaucratic battle over reserves that had pitted military bureaucrats in the War Ministry against the officers in the Supreme Command. From their respective vantage points, the entire matter of a *levée en masse* boiled down first of all to a problem of the draft: the provision of sufficient manpower reserves to the field army (and, indirectly, of woman- and child-power to the workforce).<sup>130</sup> Second, it was also a matter of propaganda and censorship, which they treated as some sort of *deus ex machina* that could raise the masses.<sup>131</sup> Both stories that reach back all the way into the 1890s are too long and tedious to be recounted here—except to say that the battle over human resources had reached an impasse in the spring and summer of 1918, exactly at the moment when German casualties once again matched and even surpassed the all-time highs of 1914 and 1916.<sup>132</sup> The year 1918 was by all accounts the worst year of fighting in the entire history of World War I (which is one of the reasons for reevaluating the idea of a covert “military strike”). By the same token, the deadlock over propaganda and censorship produced ever more elaborate plans to salvage the nation without the “truth and honesty” that Rathenau had demanded. Suffice it to say that the impasse in both cases was a result of bureaucratic infighting rather than parliamentary intervention.

Surprisingly, the first institution to jump over its Wilhelmine shadow was the stodgy Prussian War Ministry under its new war minister, General Heinrich Scheuch. Egged on by Rathenau’s dubious conviction that there were enough men who were more than ready to serve, if disaster beckoned, and savaged by Ludendorff for not providing sufficient reserves, Scheuch promised 200,000 recruits immediately and an additional million men within the next half year on October 9.<sup>133</sup> One week later, on October 17, he had revised the Rathenau-

<sup>130</sup> Stig Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus: Die deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik zwischen Status-quo-Sicherung und Aggression, 1890–1913* (Stuttgart, 1985). Holger Afflerbach, “Bis zum letzten Mann und letzten Groschen: Die Wehrpflicht im deutschen Reich und ihre Auswirkungen auf das militärische Führungsdenken im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Die Wehrpflicht*, ed. Foerster (n. 6 above), pp. 71–90.

<sup>131</sup> Dirk Stegmann, “Die deutsche Inlandspropaganda 1917/1918. Zum innenpolitischen Machtkampf zwischen OHL und ziviler Reichsleitung in der Endphase des Kaiserreiches,” *Militärhistorische Mitteilungen* 12 (1972): 329–78; Wilhelm Deist, “Zensur und Propaganda in Deutschland während des Ersten Weltkrieges,” in *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft*, ed. Deist (n. 8 above), pp. 153–64.

<sup>132</sup> Diekmann, “Die Ersatzlage im Jahr 1918,” BA-MA W-10/51 834, Teil I: “Die Entwicklung bis Ende Juli 1918,” pp. 22–35; Teil III: “Kampf um die Volksbewaffnung,” pp. 17–18.

<sup>133</sup> Meeting with the chancellor in the presence of Ludendorff, October 9, 1918, Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), p. 122; Diekmann, “Kampf um die Volksbewaffnung,” pp. 36–38; Letter to Heinrich Scheuch, October 9, 1918, Walther Rathenau, *Politische Briefe* (Dresden, 1929), pp. 188–91.

inspired numbers and now presented a breathtaking plan in some detail. He offered a regular monthly quota of 190,000 men into spring 1919 or, alternatively, a one-time allocation of 600,000 to 650,000 men and hinted at more.<sup>134</sup> A day later, he called a meeting of the department heads of the War Ministry and the military representatives of the German states to announce details. Scheuch ordered the levy to be initiated immediately.<sup>135</sup> Ludendorff was completely flustered by these figures. The only thing that came to his mind was that “if they had had available all these favorable numbers, there would not have been a crisis at the western front in the first place.”<sup>136</sup>

It is one thing to wonder if even 600,000 men ever would have been available.<sup>137</sup> It is another thing to note that Ludendorff—and this detail is of some importance—did not understand what the War Ministry actually offered. He thought that the Supreme Command had finally gotten what it had demanded all along, and he accepted the new numbers as a long overdue tribute. He even made a point of being gracious and letting bygones be bygones. But the War Ministry’s offer was not at all business as usual. The proposed levy of over half a million men in winter 1918–19, plus an unspecified huge number of additional men, was meant for a situation in which “the armistice and peace negotiations collapsed due to the harsh conditions imposed on Germany. This requires the use of all forces for the approaching *Endkampf*.”<sup>138</sup> The catch was that they could only fight once, because in order to ready them for war in spring 1919, every other activity had to be curtailed or shut down.<sup>139</sup> “Women and minors” as well as older men were to maintain an emergency structure at home and in the rear.<sup>140</sup> This was the moment when Haussmann and Ross began their frantic effort to draft a national appeal.<sup>141</sup> The Prussian War Ministry was willing to wager the imperial German nation-in-arms in a battle over the life and death of the nation. It took the rhetoric of a terminal battle literally and made preparations accordingly.

<sup>134</sup> Cabinet meeting of October 17; Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 226; Diekmann, “Kampf um die Volksbewaffnung,” pp. 41–42.

<sup>135</sup> Kgl. Württ. Militärbevollmächtigter, Nr. 1717/18 geh. to Württemberg War Ministry, October 18, 1918, HStaS, Nachlass Gen. Ltn. Theodor von Ströbel, M6601/226. Thanks to Oliver Stein who pointed me to this file in Stuttgart.

<sup>136</sup> Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 227.

<sup>137</sup> Meeting of Cabinet with Groener, November 5, 1918, *ibid.*, pp. 529–30.

<sup>138</sup> War Ministry, Order to the Territorial Commands, October 20, Diekmann, “Kampf um die Volksbewaffnung,” BA-MA W-10/51 834, pp. 50–51.

<sup>139</sup> Report of Count Lerchenfeld, October 10: According to State Secretary Solf a “battle of desperation” was only possible if industry was shut down; Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 132.

<sup>140</sup> Kgl. Württ. Militärbevollmächtigter, Nr. 1717/18 geh. to Württemberg War Ministry, October 18, 1918 (n. 135 above).

<sup>141</sup> See n. 93 above.

In order to live up to the promise of delivering the new draft and, possibly, an additional *levée* to the battlefield by the spring of 1919, the War Ministry considered changing the very premises that had guided Prussian-German conscription. However “total” the disposition over men, women, and children, conscription remained bound to a service law to be passed by the Reichstag.<sup>142</sup> The War Ministry had long held against the Supreme Command that expanding the service law to encompass everybody—“totality,” in other words—was technically impractical, inefficient, and politically impossible as well as cumbersome. In their view, “total war” mobilization was literally nonsense if handled as a matter of conscription.<sup>143</sup> However, emboldened by the idea of a terminal battle, officials of the War Ministry now concluded that they did not need legislation and that the German constitution justified extralegislative emergency measures. They interpreted Article 57—“every German has the duty to defend the fatherland”—to mean that “every man who somehow knows how to use a weapon . . . has the duty to fight.” These men were to be mobilized in special reserve units attached to regular reserve and field army units.<sup>144</sup> They prepared an actual *levée en masse* the likes of which had even escaped the visions of the most ardent French revolutionaries. The War Ministry was prepared to send every man who could walk and handle a rifle to the battlefield.

In the context and as a consequence of this totalitarian draft, policing gained a new urgency as well. The Territorial Commands [*Stellvertretende Generalkommandos*] in Germany had stepped up paramilitary policing for quite some time and had begun to consider arming local militias against insurrection. A variety of initiatives were also under way to increase control of communications and transportation hubs.<sup>145</sup> But the novel and decisive step to be taken was the introduction of a “pass law” that, by abolishing freedom of movement, allowed the identification of malingerers and gave authorities like the railway police the right to detain them preventively.<sup>146</sup> With the new pass law came

<sup>142</sup> Diekmann, “Ersatzlage,” Teil I, pp. 17–33. On the plans of the Supreme Command, see minutes on a meeting concerning reserves, June 18, 1918, Ludendorff, *Urkunden* (n. 42 above), pp. 110–16.

<sup>143</sup> See Heinrich Scheuch’s position in the meeting of June 18; Ludendorff, *Urkunden*, pp. 110–16; Richard Bessel, “Mobilization and Demobilization in Germany, 1916–1919,” in *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 212–22.

<sup>144</sup> Diekmann, “Ersatzlage,” Teil III, pp. 51–53.

<sup>145</sup> The entire issue of policing during 1918 needs further attention for the shift from criminalization of target groups, which is entirely in concordance with an authoritarian state, to terror as a key element of civil war type policing. See Peter Holquist, “‘Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work’: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context,” *Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 3 (1997): 415.

<sup>146</sup> Memorandum of the Bureau of Reserves, War Ministry, October 8, 1918, Diekmann, “Ersatzlage,” Teil III, pp. 51–53.

the expansion and toughening of the military justice system. Instant or “flying” court-martials, the curtailment of due process, and a general stiffening of punishment, as well as the extensive use of penal companies and the death penalty for shirkers in the army and the factory, were among the consequences.<sup>147</sup> In October 1918, the Prussian War Ministry entered a new world of extralegal, totalitarian apprehension of the nation for the purpose of war.

The message of a terminal battle thus changed the face of the Wilhelmine and, indeed, the nineteenth-century conscription and mobilization regime. While none of these initiatives became reality in 1918–19, they mark a totalitarian turn in both their collective disregard of individual rights and due process and their abnegation of legality. In facing defeat, one of the most bureaucratic and autocratic institutions of the Prussian-German military threw overboard constraints that had made it a vigorous opponent of the nation-in-arms for nearly half a century. The War Ministry came up not simply with a more encompassing or “total” mobilization but also with totalitarian preparations that would force the entire nation to fight to the death.

If we turn to the Supreme Command and its preparations for a terminal battle, we find scattered remarks like the one Ludendorff made to Eisenhart-Rothe. But as far as actual preparations were concerned, they were all in the gleaming eyes of Ludendorff, or so it seems. Nothing indicates that the General Staff had seriously considered the idea of continuing war after defeat, although the idea was clearly part of German military culture. After all, no less an authority than Carl von Clausewitz had written that the *Endkampf* is the spirit of the nation-in-arms. In fact, he had defined “people in arms” not as some regime of conscription but as “war by means of popular uprising” in the face of defeat.<sup>148</sup>

Even after a defeat, there is always the possibility that a turn of fortune can be brought about by developing new sources of internal strength or through the natural decimation all offensives suffer in the long run or by means of help from abroad. There will always be time enough to die; like a drowning man who will clutch instinctively at a straw, it is the natural law of the moral world that a nation that finds itself on the brink of an abyss will try to save itself by any means. No matter how small and weak a state may be in comparison with its enemy, it must not forgo these last efforts, or one would conclude that its soul is dead. The possibility of avoiding total ruin by paying a high price for peace should not be ruled out, but even this intention will not, in turn, eliminate the usefulness of new measures of defense. . . . A government that, after having lost a

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mann, “Ersatzlage,” Teil III, p. 37. However, the memorandum also points to the great difficulties with introducing a passport with a photo.

<sup>147</sup> Quartermaster General, July 18, 1918, Diekmann, “Ersatzlage,” Teil II: Documents, no. 5, no page.

<sup>148</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J., 1976), bk. 6, chap. 26, pp. 479–83.

major battle, is only interested in letting its people go back to sleep in peace as soon as possible and, overwhelmed by feelings of failure and disappointment, lacks the courage and desire to put forth a final effort, is, because of its weakness, involved in a major inconsistency in any case. It shows that it did not deserve to win, and, possibly for that very reason, was unable to.<sup>149</sup>

Ludendorff may even have thought of Clausewitz's passage when, in a much quoted incident, he heard of a case of the plague (*Lungenpest*) in the French army, "clutching at a straw like a drowning man."<sup>150</sup> But the Supreme Command caught on only slowly to the notion of a terminal battle.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff signaled their own change of mind (which occurred between October 10 and 14 and was influenced by the second Wilson note) concerning a last call to arms in a telegram to Max von Baden on October 14.<sup>151</sup> They mainly proposed a propaganda initiative to mobilize public opinion against "the terrible consequences of a peace *à tout prix*." The telegram emphasized that the military situation depended on the ability of the government to raise the "despondent spirit" of the people and to overcome "inner strife." Without the home front giving full support to the "men in the field," nobody should expect victory. As this had been said many times before, the cabinet members suspected that Ludendorff and Hindenburg were merely attempting to shift responsibility for defeat once again. Although this may well have been their original intent, another concept had sneaked into the telegram. The Supreme Command now argued for a continuation of war, fought for the sake of honor rather than as a deterrent against Allied invasion or as a lever for peace negotiations, which had been the purpose of the civilian *défense nationale*.

Our enemies gain strength for attack from our inner strife and despondent heart. . . . Hostile and neutral countries have begun seeing us no longer as a people which most joyously sets everything on the defense of its honor [*ein Volk . . . das freudigst alles setzt an seine Ehre*]. . . . Nobody must find reason to doubt the iron-clad [*felsenfest*] will of the people to defend itself to the very extreme against humiliating condition. Only then will the army find the strength to defy superior force. . . . In all manner of public proclamation the will must come to articulation that the German people know only two ways: honorable peace or war *à outrance*.<sup>152</sup>

The Supreme Command used oddly archaic and arcane language, imitating nineteenth-century epic style, to introduce its alternative to the *levée en masse* and the republican quest for peace negotiations. This stance of epic outrage

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 483.

<sup>150</sup> Foerster, "Ludendorff's seelische Haltung" (n. 27 above), pp. 90–92. Ludendorff supposedly said: "Like a drowning man grasps a straw, I grasped this news."

<sup>151</sup> Ludendorff, *Urkunden*, pp. 551–53.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 552.



was to become the common language of the terminal battle. However, it was articulated by the Supreme Command not as a military measure but as an act of defiance in rejection of the armistice process that in its view had gotten out of control. The definitive formulation of this rhetoric can be found in a subsequent message of the Supreme Command to Max von Baden: “Will the German people fight for their honor not just with words, but fight to the last man, and therefore guarantee the possibility of rebirth [*Widererstehen*], or will it be pushed into capitulation and therefore to destruction before a last extreme exertion?”<sup>153</sup>

It may well be that for a great number of officers in the staffs and the field army, the terminal battle was never more than this kind of deeply held conviction. In this case, the idea of defending military honor amounted to saying that the end of the war should be sought on the battlefield rather than at the conference table—implying that they were kept from defending German honor by an evil and traitorous government. But, as with conscription, the language of a terminal battle took on a life of its own.

Everything points to the Supreme Command calculating by mid-October that German forces would evade enemy forces and retreat to then engage in a final battle in the spring of 1919 along the German border, mostly on enemy territory in eastern Belgium and France, but extending onto German land.<sup>154</sup> It seems that Ludendorff and especially Hindenburg thought of this battle as a Verdun-type confrontation in which the Allies would run up against the German border fortresses.<sup>155</sup> But as the idea of a resumption or continuation of war began to be weighed more seriously, this notion of a last stand began to change into something different and new. Ludendorff pointed to this transformation in a military briefing on October 23 when he emphasized the need

<sup>153</sup> Telephone call of Hindenburg to Max von Baden on October 20, transmitted by the liaison, Colonel Haeften. *Amtliche Urkunden* (n. 56 above), doc. 63, p. 166. See also the telegram that triggered (but was not the cause of) Ludendorff's dismissal (telegram of October 24 from the chief of the General Staff [and signed by Hindenburg] to the armies) in which the Supreme Command stated that “Wilson . . . demands military capitulation. This is unacceptable for the soldier. . . . For soldiers, Wilson's response therefore can only be a summons to continue resistance with utmost force.” Ibid., doc. 76b, p. 194. At this point, the synchronization with the Right worked. The Deutsche Vaterlandspartei issued a similar memorandum to Max von Baden on the same day. Hagenlücke (n. 121 above), p. 381.

<sup>154</sup> See, e.g., the file on “Organisation der Abwehrschlacht” with a determination of defensive lines and zones in Alsace-Lorraine; HStaS, Heeresgruppe Herzog Albrecht, M 30/1/154.

<sup>155</sup> On border defense, see Hermann von Kuhl, *Der Weltkrieg, 1914–1918: Dem deutschen Volke dargestellt* (Berlin, 1929), 11:432 (only in planning stage). The key for these initial considerations of a defensive battle was Metz as the German equivalent to Verdun.

for “a continuation of war in a radicalized [*verschärfter*] form,” if and when armistice negotiations failed, which he now considered a certainty.<sup>156</sup>

The question is what Ludendorff alluded to when invoking a radicalized form of war. Since evidence is scarce, we may usefully start with an article by the usually well informed Bernhard Schwertfeger which he published in the semi-official *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* in early November 1918.<sup>157</sup> He argued that the German field army must hold the occupied territories and their populations hostage. Although the field army could no longer force the enemy to conclude peace in direct confrontation, it could still threaten irreparable damage and thus force the hand of the Allies.

It will be necessary for our enemies to pay for every step ahead with streams of blood. Large areas which so far have been unaffected by war will be wrecked completely [*sinken dabei in Trümmer*]. If the enemy wants to push us out of the occupied parts of northern France and if they want to force a retreat from Belgium, they will have to count on an extended period of bloody battles and the completely useless destruction of their own territory.<sup>158</sup>

The war in a new key that Ludendorff proposed, we may surmise, was this kind of hostage war against the civilian infrastructure and civilian populations of the occupied territories. As such it was a type of war not unknown in military history. Moreover, the German military had lashed out against Belgian civilians in its antipartisan war against francs-tireurs in 1914–15, which might be taken as a precedent.<sup>159</sup> But the latter would hardly qualify as a radicalization of war in 1918.

A different scenario, which must remain sketchy at this point, is more likely. As early as May 1918—that is, in the midst of the German offensive—internal staff considerations both in the Supreme Command and in the army field commands had begun to focus on the question of how to contain a future onslaught of vastly superior Allied forces.<sup>160</sup> Two elements characterized staff thinking.

<sup>156</sup> Chief of General Staff, situation report, October 23, 1918; Rupprecht von Bayern, *Kriegstagebuch* (n. 81 above), 3:363.

<sup>157</sup> The case gains some poignancy due to the fact that Schwertfeger became one of the main researchers for the Reichstag Enquete concerning the sources of the German collapse. Bernhard Schwertfeger, “Die politischen und militärischen Verantwortlichkeiten im Verlauf der Offensive von 1918, 2 Teile,” in *Die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruches im Jahre 1918*, ed. Albrecht Philipp (Berlin, 1925).

<sup>158</sup> Schwertfeger, *Das Weltkriegsende* (n. 24 above), p. 197.

<sup>159</sup> For the precedent, see Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York, 1991).

<sup>160</sup> This controversial issue is summarized in Hans Meier-Welcker, “Die deutsche Führung an der Westfront im Frühsommer 1918: Zum Problem der militärischen Lagebeurteilung,” *Welt als Geschichte* 21 (1961): 164–84. Peter Graf Kielmannsegg, *Deutschland und der Erste Weltkrieg*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart, 1980), pp. 642–55.

First, key staff officers debated a strategic retreat, even the evacuation of France.<sup>161</sup> They argued that the extended lines could not be held and that successful defensive operations, especially under conditions of Allied technological superiority, depended not simply on total manpower available, as Ludendorff had come to insist, but also on the mobility of reserves. Heightened mobility was seriously curtailed due to the lack of lateral transportation.<sup>162</sup> Hence, they supported early on the far-reaching withdrawals that became reality under duress beginning in July and August 1918. Second, they complained about the Supreme Command's tendency to control operations and, in this context, about Ludendorff's insistence on holding territory at any price.<sup>163</sup> Ever since July 18, with the French counter-offensive at Villers-Cotterets, this issue had become the subject of serious disagreements between Ludendorff and the field staffs, particularly the defensive champions of the field army, Fritz von Loßberg and Kuhl.<sup>164</sup> On September 29, the Supreme Command not only asked for an "instant armistice" but also issued new orders that returned decision-making power to the field commands down to the divisional level. On September 30, Ludendorff's order was amended to make coordinated evasion the key principle of defensive operations.<sup>165</sup> On the army level, his order consolidated another and altogether more important shift that had begun to take shape in August and September but dated back to the reconsideration of

<sup>161</sup> After the war Wilhelm Groener made this point most vociferously. Copy of letter from Groener to Hintze, October 28, 1919, BA-MA W-10/52066. For the argument in favor of a more limited withdrawal, see the cautious critique of Kuhl, *Der Weltkrieg*, 11:400.

<sup>162</sup> Hermann von Kuhl, "Entstehung, Durchführung und Zusammenbruch der Offensive von 1918," in *Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, ed. Albrecht Philipp (Berlin, 1924), pp. 1–238.

<sup>163</sup> [Wolfgang] Foerster, "Ludendorffs Strategie vom April bis Oktober 1918," pp. 75–76, BA-MA RH6/v.38. General Wetzell, "Die Oberste Heeresleitung in der Abwehr; Stellungnahme zu der Vorarbeit zu Band XIV," p. 7, speaks of Ludendorff's intention "to force the French into bleeding themselves to death," BA-MA W-10/51 828. This may well have been the case. Ludendorff also seems to have thought that control over French and Belgian territory could be used as a bargaining chip. Kuhl, *Der Weltkrieg*, 11:433: "We stay put where we are." These tactics drove up casualties dramatically and may well be partly responsible for the growing unrest among frontline troops in the summer of 1918. Such tactics were surely one of the causes (the others being desertion and surrender) for the continuing dramatic depletion of manpower after the end of the spring offensive. The extraordinarily high casualty rates of August, September, and October 1918 are commonly overlooked. Diekmann, "Ersatzlage" (n. 132 above), Teil III, p. 1.

<sup>164</sup> Fritz von Loßberg, *Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkrieg, 1914–1918* (Berlin, 1939), pp. 347–49; Kuhl, *Der Weltkrieg*, 11:400, 428.

<sup>165</sup> Rupprecht von Bayern, *Kriegstagebuch* (n. 81 above), 3:358–59. Rupprecht noted on September 29: "At last! One recognizes the influence of Hindenburg."

the German defensive posture in spring. The field army abandoned its “tactics of defense in trench warfare” in favor of “defensive operations in deep zones.”<sup>166</sup>

This turn to an operational doctrine of flexible defense in deep zones involved, as one of its main tools, the systematic use of civilian evacuation and destruction of infrastructure.<sup>167</sup> Scorched-earth tactics had been used before, for example during the withdrawal to the Hindenburg line, and were prepared and practiced extensively during the retreat of August and September 1918.<sup>168</sup> Not infrequently, retreat and evasion were used for reckless plunder, but the latter was quite commonly prosecuted in military courts.<sup>169</sup> It appears that Ludendorff now drew (or was drawn into) the consequences of this experience. He insisted “that Germany cannot continue the old forbearance in areas to be evacuated, because it harms itself in the process,” and he warned that, compared to the retreat through Belgium, the advance in 1914 had been “child’s play.” He considered the destruction of the civilian infrastructure as self-evidently necessary and intimated that this would come to include the mass destruction of shelter and provisions. The retreating army would not just leave behind an “intensely devastated territory.”<sup>170</sup> It would also be natural that “fighting forces make quarters for themselves, take the cow from the field and the provisions from the homes.” He envisioned a retreat in which the army lived off the land, left behind a devastated country,<sup>171</sup> and moved toward an all-out war against civilians.<sup>172</sup>

When talking to the cabinet, Ludendorff left unclear what, in actual fact, he had in mind. He and the cabinet members talked at cross-purposes. The cabinet members simply could not conceive of what the military staffs were preparing,

<sup>166</sup> General Wetzell, “Stellungnahme zu dem Entwurf einer Resolution des 4. Untersuchungsausschusses über die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruches im Jahre 1918,” BA-MA RH61/v.139, p. 54.

<sup>167</sup> Rupprecht von Bayern, *Kriegstagebuch*, 3:358–59. The Supreme Command’s order emphasized the necessity of complete destruction of railways and telephone communications.

<sup>168</sup> See, e.g., Supreme Command, “Retrospective assessment of the military situation,” September 15, 1918; *Amtliche Urkunden* (n. 56 above), doc. 10c, pp. 39–40. See also the planned destruction in the area of the Heeresgruppe Herzog Albrecht (Alsace Lorraine); HStaS, M 30/1/259.

<sup>169</sup> See file “Diebstähle und Räubereien deutscher Militärpersonen zum Schaden der feindlichen Bevölkerung im besetzten Gebiet”; Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, MA [Ministerium des kgl. Hauses und des Äußeren bzw. der Staatskanzlei] 104153.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>171</sup> Meeting of October 17, Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), pp. 240–41.

<sup>172</sup> The issue developed into a tug-of-war over words in the preparation of the third German armistice note.

and the military did little to clarify its thoughts and actions. The civilians, in any case, thought of random acts of pillage and wanton destruction by reckless officers and brutalized soldiers and demanded a blanket prohibition of all such acts. However, in demanding an end to wanton destruction as they saw it, they effectively undercut the preparatory steps that had been under way to clear a new defensive line, the Antwerpen-Maas or A-M line. Obviously, there was no time to build up a system of trenches, but the younger staff officers agreed that the time for static trench warfare had passed anyway. What the Supreme Command had in mind was less the construction of yet another defensive line than a free shooting range in one of the most heavily populated and industrial areas of Belgium. Defense in deep zones in Belgium was to be house-to-house combat, urban warfare—war “amidst the sea of houses and the mines,” as Colonel Heye put it in his memoirs—which favored German defensive tactics against English tanks, long-range guns, and planes, before the Allies reached German territory.<sup>173</sup> If the Supreme Command had had the last word, Belgium would have been “essentially destroyed.”<sup>174</sup>

Wanton destruction is, of course, the issue President Wilson had raised in his second and third note, but the irony of his accusation is that he mostly had the 1914 war against Belgian *francs-tireurs* and the unrestricted submarine warfare in mind. What outraged the president was history—scattered acts of pillage, destruction, and vengeance. He failed to recognize fully the nature of the destruction in the retreat to the Hindenburg line and, above all, the danger of an incipient systematic war of devastation. In the end, such systematic devastation proved much more limited than Ludendorff intended it to be. Effectively, it amounted to acts of pillage and local acts of destruction by retreating units. But this was entirely due to the haste of the retreat under Allied pressure and, not least, to the new German government’s insistence that destruction must be curtailed, which led to the outright prohibition of preparations for a new defensive line in the heavily populated areas of Belgium.<sup>175</sup> The civilian government prevailed in overall policy, but it did not control the field formations, which continued the practice and attributed the slow-down of the Allied advance to the thoroughness of their ad hoc measures.<sup>176</sup>

While the entire matter of the German retreat will require more detailed research, there is good reason to argue that a threshold was crossed in October 1918. The notion of an *Endkampf* had evolved from an imagined pitched battle centered on a chain of fortresses along the German border into a retreat, or-

<sup>173</sup> *Lebenserinnerungen des Generaloberst Wilhelm von Heye*, BA-MA NI Heye N 18/5, Teil II: *Wie ich den Weltkrieg erlebte*, p. 79.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Meeting of October 17, Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 241.

ganized as defensive warfare in deep zones, that “necessitated” total devastation in an all-out war against the civilian infrastructure and the civilian population. There is also every reason to believe, although this is still in the realm of conjecture, that the “defense in deep zones” did not end along the German border but extended all the way back to the Rhine and involved German territory in the same war of devastation that Ludendorff had threatened to use against the Belgians.

The conjecture gains substance, if we look at postwar developments. A youngish major who had become second operations officer in the Supreme Command in summer 1918, Joachim von Stülpnagel, proceeded after the war to fashion the tactics of 1918 into a war plan that he called *Volkskrieg*, people’s war. He picked up, explicitly, on the experience of the defensive battles in late 1918 and developed the military and political implications of the *Endkampf* to their radical conclusion. He asked the pertinent question that Ludendorff never dared to ask: how to continue fighting if “the army is no longer capable of defending the integrity of German borders in the case of a hostile attack.”<sup>177</sup> The answer was a war of national self-annihilation in order to stop the invasion.

In a lengthy memorandum written in late 1923 and early 1924, “Thoughts on the War of the Future,” Stülpnagel laid out that, in order to “liberate” Germany from superior forces, the army would have to adapt and change the “grand laws of warfare, [because] a desperate situation requires desperate means.”

The inequality of military strength [*materielle Kräfte*] forces us to seek new ways [of waging war]. What is to be new in strategy and tactics must come as surprise and as bewilderment to the French who will depend on the superiority of their weapons and proceed mechanically. It will have to be supported by the moral force [*sittliche Kräfte*] of a popular insurrection [*Volkserhebung*] to be initiated on a grand scale.<sup>178</sup>

A popular insurrection entailed preparation for a war in which “any distinction between combatants [and noncombatants] disappears and all persons and all things become means of war.” The mobilization of all men, women, and children was to be complemented by systematic evacuation and large-scale devastation. The ground yielded to enemy forces was to be stripped of all useful objects and shelter. Germany itself would become ground zero for a war of scorched earth. The effects of devastation and evacuation were to be

<sup>177</sup> Joachim von Stülpnagel to Otto Hasse, June 26, 1925, BA-MA NI Stülpnagel N5/20.

<sup>178</sup> The original is in BA-MA NI Stülpnagel 5/10; an official copy, that is, a copy that circulated among the staff, can be found under [Zentrale] 153/24 z, February 26, 1924, BA-MA RH8/v.911. Stülpnagel also distributed copies widely to former officers, including Hindenburg.

enhanced by partisan warfare. Stülpnagel expected that acts of “sabotage and murder [*Einzel mord*]” would lead to reprisals—“most brutal acts of suppression” by the invading forces such as the burning of towns, the murder of hostages, the internment of the remaining civilian population in concentration camps, and, in case of insubordination, “the shooting of a large number of civilians.”<sup>179</sup> In turn, the utter brutality of the invading enemy would inflame the people who would now rise in desperation. People’s war was “area war in deepest zones” [*Flächenkrieg in tiefsten Zonen*] that forced the enemy “to slowly eat its way through the German territory,”<sup>180</sup> where it would encounter a “popular insurrection” in which “the many who have nothing to lose and, being fanatically incited and supported by the German hinterland, can do anything.”<sup>181</sup> What Stülpnagel sketched was literally a war of self-annihilation: “If victory is at stake, considerations concerning the survival of the population do not matter.”<sup>182</sup> The end of such a war would come, not as the effect of a political decision or military defeat, but with the exhaustion of the people’s power (*Volkskraft*), the catastrophic implosion of social order and political authority.

The Stülpnagel memorandum distilled the essence of military debate about a terminal battle in late 1918. The notion of an *Endkampf* had started out as a mere metaphor. For a majority of officers it remained a matter of continuing war into 1919, ending in a climactic battle along the German border. But this kind of battle-centered view gave way to an emergent doctrine of a war of annihilation, and of self-annihilation at that. It was a war that pitted people rather than armies against each other—and not simply in the nation-in-war sense that all citizens were to be mobilized or that civilians were to become subject to attack. Rather, all men, women, and children were meant to be fighting, digging trenches, or hauling ammunition. We might think that this was pure metaphor lifted from and interpreting a more constrained military practice. But by 1923–24 Stülpnagel’s vision had become the subject of war games, and by 1925–26 mobilization, evacuation, and destruction schemes were worked out in detailed plans.<sup>183</sup> As the notion of the *Endkampf* had be-

<sup>179</sup> Draft of summary conclusions for the 1924 war game [279/24 T1 IB geh. to TA] “People’s War and Border Defense [*Volkskrieg und Grenzschutz*].” BA-MA NI Stülpnagel N5/20.

<sup>180</sup> Draft of summary conclusions for the 1924 war game [279/24 T1 IB geh. to TA] “People’s War and Border Defense [*Volkskrieg und Grenzschutz*].” BA-MA NI Stülpnagel N5/20.

<sup>181</sup> Draft of concluding evaluation of the 1925 war game “Battle against Poland,” June 1925, BA-MA NI Stülpnagel N5/20.

<sup>182</sup> Draft of summary conclusions for the 1924 war game; see n. 169 above. The operations section presumed casualty rates of up to 75 percent among the border defense units.

<sup>183</sup> Michael Geyer, *Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit: Die Reichswehr in der Krise der*



come more radical, it had moved from the realm of metaphor into the realm of reality.

This much seems apparent: October 1918 was a turning point in the history of German military thought and practice. If Rathenau's call for popular insurrection initially appeared as a mere curiosity, it now rather seems to stand at the cusp of a seminal transition. Politically, Rathenau's ideas reflected the will of a good part of the civilian and political elite to rally for the defense of the nation. At least initially, this sentiment emerged not from the Right but from the cosmopolitan Berlin elites and the left-center parties of the Reichstag. When the new government yielded to the pressures of the Supreme Command, the damage proved to be extraordinary. Max von Baden's move to initiate armistice negotiations without a call for national defense jeopardized, virtually overnight, both an altogether unselfconscious sense of national integrity within the ruling left-center coalition and its moral authority to speak for the nation. Bowing to the expertise of civil and military officials, the new government undercut the legacy of nineteenth-century liberal and republican nationalism in Germany, which now for the first time—in late October 1918—fell prey to the Right. Of course, if Max von Baden and the left-center majority had prevailed, he might as well have been swept away just as Aleksandr Kerensky was in Russia.

Equally important, what was left of the culture of the Prussian-German military of the Second Empire after four years of war, with its stake in limited war and its resistance to people's war, was dismantled in October 1918.<sup>184</sup> Wherever we turn—conscription or operational planning, home front or battlefield—we encounter a new way of thinking about war as well as first indications of a new practice that contemporaries called people's war. Its key feature is the turn from an imperial, class- and caste-based military institution to a national and, indeed, nationalizing one, from imperial war to war fought with and by the people.<sup>185</sup> The main components of the emergent reality of people's war were plebiscitary mobilization, extralegal organization, and unrestrained violence against enemy populations in pursuit of war. What linked republican totalitarians like Rathenau and military totalitarians like Stülpnagel

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*Machtpolitik, 1924–1936* (Wiesbaden, 1980). Johannes Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener: Reichswehrminister am Ende der Weimarer Republik (1928–1932)* (Munich, 1992), pp. 128–48.

<sup>184</sup> Stig Förster, "Optionen der Kriegführung im Zeitalter des 'Volkskrieges': Zu Helmut von Moltke's militärisch-politischen Überlegungen nach den Erfahrungen der Einnigungskriege," in *Militärische Verantwortung in Staat und Gesellschaft: 175 Jahre Generalstabsausbildung in Deutschland*, ed. Detlef Bald (Koblenz, 1986), pp. 83–107.

<sup>185</sup> This is in contrast to the situation in 1914: Egmont Zechlin, "Deutschland zwischen Kabinettskrieg und Wirtschaftskrieg. Politik und Kriegführung in den ersten Monaten des Weltkrieges 1914," *Historische Zeitschrift* 199 (1964): 347–458.

was the common presumption that war had become a violent conflagration engulfing everyone and everything, that such war could only be fought as a violent *plebiscite de tous les jours*. What separated them was that the totalitarian Right wagered the collective death of a people in order to avert defeat, whereas the totalitarian Left thought that the threat of a war of self-annihilation would deter a continuation of war. Meanwhile, the British forces had come to rely on technology which, together with the aggressiveness of the Commonwealth forces, assured the viability of decisive (and, hence, limited) warfare. War of annihilation, deterrence, decisive war—if we step back from the events in October 1918, we recognize the grand alternatives of twentieth-century warfare.

#### “TO MAKE A LOST WAR LOST”

Defeat did not lead to an *Endkampf* for two reasons. The government of Prince Max von Baden decided to forfeit a terminal battle, and the Reichstag majority turned against it as well—decisions that set free the revolution in November. It is hard to find more consequential and, indeed, courageous decisions in twentieth-century German politics. And yet, these decisions for peace are almost completely forgotten. Ending the war by political means meant that the survival of the nation was a higher good than military or, for that matter, national honor. It was a decision that was to split the German nation for the remainder of the century.<sup>186</sup>

In a long letter to his cousin Fritz (Friedrich II, archduke of Baden), Max described the imminent controversy over the *Endkampf* as his “Calvary” where he would “stand and fall.” He would have to do the unthinkable: “We are forced to accept Wilson’s harsh conditions, if we do not want to see the last flower of German manhood and our hopes for the future bleed to death uselessly on the battlefield.” The “military backbone is broken” and the only chance was “to hold out for a peace which gives us life and a glimmer of hope for the future.” He pleaded with the family elder that there was only one thing to be done: “To save Germany.” To this end, he would “sacrifice himself,” because this is “the task predestination has in store for me.”<sup>187</sup> We note the spirit of piety and, indeed, pietism as opposed to the epic upheaval championed

<sup>186</sup> The reverberations of this debate extend all the way to the so-called *Historikerstreit*. See esp. Andreas Hillgruber’s essay on “two kinds of catastrophe”—an ill-fated reflection on the military defeat of the Third Reich, which, among other things, was unaware of the historicity of this thinking about military catastrophe. Andreas Hillgruber, *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* (Berlin, 1986).

<sup>187</sup> Max von Baden (n. 40 above), pp. 405–57.

by the Supreme Command and the manifestos of the nationalist Right that now began to pour in. We also observe the language of sacrifice and salvation which eventually was to be superseded by the controversy over the “king’s death ride”—the controversy over intentions and ideas of a sacrificial death of Wilhelm II at the front on November 9.<sup>188</sup> But above all, we might note that the agent of salvation was the “self” rather than any number of evil “others” and that the object of salvation was neither patrimony nor monarchy but the nation.

Max von Baden stood up to Ludendorff. In a remarkable *aide memoire* he sketched out his political position a day ahead of the crucial cabinet meeting on October 17. With the military situation as it was, he insisted, the political leadership would have to make choices:

Either continuation of the war unto annihilation [*bis zur Vernichtung*] or the attempt, in the wake of the military collapse, to salvage economically and politically what can be salvaged. The desire to perish in honor surely suggests itself to the individual, but the responsible statesman must recognize that a people in its entirety has the right to demand with all due sobriety that they live rather than die in beauty.<sup>189</sup>

The government’s first responsibility was to assure the survival of the people, and if this meant acknowledging defeat, it had to be despite the humiliation that came with it. What was left to be done was to respond “with dignity” to President Wilson as the “*arbiter mundi*.”

The grand political debate over war or peace took place on the morning of October 17 in the presence of Generals Ludendorff and Max Hoffmann (chief of staff in the eastern High Command) and the chief operations officer of the Supreme Command, Colonel Heye. The minutes of the meeting reveal less decisiveness than the contrary positions might lead one to expect, but the peace process continued and, as an effect of the meeting, became unstoppable short of a *coup d’état*.<sup>190</sup> Arguments erupted over whom to blame for defeat. The

<sup>188</sup> Kaehler, “Vier quellenkritische Untersuchungen (fn. 16); Wilhelm Michaelis, “Zum Problem des Königstodes am Ende der Hohenzollernmonarchie,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 13 (1962): 695–704; Martin Kohlrausch, “The Deserting Warlord: Fashioning Wilhelm II’s Flight in Germany after the First World War” (M.A. thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 1997). This debate is one entry point into ideas of collective death in 1918. A study along these lines would entail a discussion of the attempted refashioning of the emperor either as a “tribal king” (hence: the *king’s* ride into death) through his sacrifice for a future Germanic people’s state, or, alternatively (among Suebians like Groener), as a Barbarossa.

<sup>189</sup> Aide-mémoire of Max von Baden, October 16, 1918; Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung* (n. 2 above), pp. 216–17, here p. 216.

<sup>190</sup> Cabinet meeting, with Generals Ludendorff and Hoffmann attending the morning session; and Cabinet meeting (afternoon), October 17, 1918, Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, pp. 220–53.

hawkish position taken was that “dishonorable conditions could not be accepted” and that it was preferable “to be beaten completely than to surrender.”<sup>191</sup> Everybody knew the alternative. Germany would have to engage in a “war of desperation” [*Verzweiflungskampf*], in a “final struggle over life and death” [*Endkampf um Leben oder Tod*], over “to be or not to be” [*Sein oder Nichtsein*]. Then again, others held that “fighting to the last man was unfeasible in a modern state.”<sup>192</sup> What could be done in order to nudge President Wilson in the direction of a less humiliating peace? The alternative was *Endkampf* or de facto capitulation. If armistice negotiations continued and the Allied conditions were met, capitulation would be the effective result, although nobody quite dared yet to say this openly and in public. But there was no doubt. With the decision to continue the peace process, the cabinet of Prince Max von Baden decided “to make a lost war lost,” as Vice Chancellor Friedrich von Payer put it on October 20.<sup>193</sup>

Was the *Endkampf* a viable alternative? In the midst of the *angst*-ridden deliberations Ludendorff appeared in stunningly good spirits. When asked if the new reserves would make a difference in determining the outcome of the war, he answered that he could not possibly promise anything: “War is not a mathematical calculation,” and, yes, while it was likely that Germany would be defeated, one never knew. There was always another chance and, for once, the “soldier’s luck might shine on the German side.” The *Feldherr* commits his troops and his plan works or it doesn’t. When pressed by Max von Baden to state if indeed a continuation of war for another six months at the rate of anywhere between 20,000 and 25,000 casualties per month would make any difference at all and whether there was even the slimmest possibility that this would improve German chances at the negotiating table, Ludendorff cheerfully answered: “Maybe it would, maybe it would not.”<sup>194</sup> In his memoirs Ludendorff interpolated that he was certain that the German border could be held.<sup>195</sup> But in the debate itself—when challenged by the chancellor with the sugges-

<sup>191</sup> Robert Friedberg, national liberal vice president of the Prussian State Ministry, quoted in Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 243.

<sup>192</sup> Roedern, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 233, 238, 243.

<sup>193</sup> Payer, in the Cabinet meeting of October 20, 1918; Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 289. The full quote is: “One is allowed [in this situation] to think of one’s good name. We are the ones to make the lost war lost. We carry the responsibility before history.”

<sup>194</sup> Ludendorff had extended the extremes very far, indeed. If the German army was pushed back to the German borders, it would have to make a last stand there that would “decide, if we can prevail or if we succumb” (Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 243). This was what Colonel Haeften thought when he mentioned that “the war would not stretch to the outer limits,” but he then instantly added that he would have to ask Ludendorff for clarification first.

<sup>195</sup> Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen* (n. 29 above), p. 570.

tion that there could be worse things than Wilson's armistice demands, namely that "they [might] break into Germany and devastate the country"—Ludendorff simply and more correctly responded, that "we are not yet there by far."<sup>196</sup> What matters here is that Ludendorff refused to consider the consequence of his proposition; that, indeed, invasion, devastation, and occupation were a likely outcome of the *Endkampf*. The liberal state secretary Conrad Haussman, who otherwise was quite captivated by Ludendorff's performance, characterized the latter's position acutely: "Earlier the opinion was: no military catastrophe, but supporting diplomatic measures; but now it is: rather military catastrophe than acceptance of humiliating conditions."<sup>197</sup>

With negotiations continuing, now focusing on naval issues,<sup>198</sup> the government was forced into a decision a week later.<sup>199</sup> Hindenburg and Ludendorff had come to Berlin against the expressed will of Max von Baden in order to convince the emperor to initiate a call for a people's war.<sup>200</sup> The emperor rebuffed the two and sent them (together with the chief of staff of the Naval High Command, Magnus von Levetzow, the commander of the Naval High Command, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, and the war minister, General Scheuch) to the apartment of Vice Chancellor Payer. Max von Baden had fallen ill and was absent. In the course of the meeting Payer declined Ludendorff's demand to abandon armistice negotiations and to call for popular insurrection.

According to Levetzow, Ludendorff set out to convince Payer "that the honor of the nation and of the soldier requires a rejection of the excessive

<sup>196</sup> Cabinet meeting, October 17, 1918 (afternoon); Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 246.

<sup>197</sup> Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 246. In his memoirs Haußmann makes clear how much depended on an open discussion of options with Ludendorff. The supporters of a continuation of the war like Haußmann were concerned above all with whether or not the Supreme Command could provide a minimum guarantee that the military situation allowed sufficient time for negotiation. Conrad Haußmann, *Schlaglichter* (n. 84 above), p. 256.

<sup>198</sup> As with the king's sacrifice, I am omitting here the debate on the suicide mission of the navy. The reason is much the same. The rush to conclusions has garbled the event and its meaning(s). However, there is no doubt that the naval brass wanted a suicide mission. As useful recent summary, see Gerhard Paul Groß, *Die Seekriegführung der kaiserlichen Marine im Jahre 1918* (Frankfurt am Main and Bern, 1989).

<sup>199</sup> The purpose of this message is the subject of considerable controversy, because at least superficially the dismissal of Ludendorff was its outcome. Surprisingly, there is still no satisfactory monographic and empirical analysis simply of what happened. As it stands, Kaehler, "Vier quellenkritische Untersuchungen" (n. 16 above), remains the most careful and thoughtful treatment of the subject. The standard reference is Alfred Niemann, *Kaiser und Revolution: Die entscheidenden Ereignisse im Großen Hauptquartier* (Berlin, 1922).

<sup>200</sup> Chief of the General Staff of the field army, Field Marshal von Hindenburg to the armies, October 24, 1918, *Amtliche Urkunden* (n. 56 above), doc. 76b, p. 104.

demands of Wilson,” whereupon Payer responded that “he had lost trust in the capability of both the people and the army to resist,” adding: “I am a simple *Bürger* and civilian; I only see the starving masses.” Ludendorff countered: “Then, your Excellency, I throw the entire shame of the fatherland into your and your colleagues’ faces.” Levetzow had a keen cinematic eye for the protagonists—Ludendorff “a majestic man, a representative of German honor”; Payer “a small, crappy party hack without a sense of national dignity and honor . . . weighing everything only from a petit bourgeois point of view . . . sitting there cowering, with his beady, hate-filled eyes and clasped hands, under the powerful blows of the general.”<sup>201</sup> One could call this the pivotal scene in the formation of the stab-in-the-back legend. Levetzow’s recollection became a crucial piece of evidence in the stab-in-the-back trials in the mid-twenties, and the image of the “beady-eyed” Payer is, of course, a rendition of the dwarf Alberich as Jew who is beaten into submission by the mighty Siegfried.<sup>202</sup>

Payer had a very different account of the showdown which is not so well remembered and rarely quoted in full.

The gentlemen of the Supreme Command submitted their opinion that in view of Wilson’s last note, which means nothing but capitulation and a shameful peace [*Schmachfrieden*], the armistice negotiations must be ended. The emperor, the dynastic heads of the states, the imperial government, the leadership of army and navy and the parliament were to issue a solemn, joint proclamation for a gathering [*Sammlung*] of all forces in order to continue the war with utmost decisiveness.<sup>203</sup>

Payer summarized his response as follows:

I had a great deal of sympathy for the manly and soldierly character of the [Supreme Command’s] plan and I did not expect good things to come from armistice negotiations, judged by the way Wilson treated our armistice request. But it was my duty to assess the situation calmly rather than follow my sentiments. An army commander with his entourage may well end his illustrious career [*Ruhmeslaufbahn*] with a ride into death [*Todesritt*], but a people of seventy million cannot make the decision about life and death according to the terms of honor of a single estate [i.e., the military]. It cannot make its future [*Schicksal*] dependent on potentialities which rest on hopes rather than facts. . . . I could not find that the idea of continuing the war indefinitely . . . would bring us any chance of success.<sup>204</sup>

Payer put Ludendorff on the spot: Did he, Ludendorff, consider a stabilization of the military situation feasible, at least for some time to come? He

<sup>201</sup> Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik* (n. 50 above), 2:1338–40.

<sup>202</sup> Ulrich Heinemann, *Die verdrängte Niederlage: Politische Öffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen, 1983).

<sup>203</sup> Friedrich Payer, *Von Bethmann Hollweg bis Ebert: Erinnerungen und Bilder* (Frankfurt am Main, 1923), pp. 142–43.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

did not get what he considered a satisfactory answer. The answer to the question of whether the continuation of war into spring of 1919 would improve German chances on the battlefield or at the conference table had been negative already on October 17. The possibility of Germany being invaded and occupied had been raised. The price for military honor, a terminal battle, appeared too high. The government of Prince Max von Baden, which had come to power with an agenda of national defense, decided to capitulate in order to salvage the nation from military defeat. The issue of the emperor (which was raised in the third Wilson note) came to overshadow this decision, but the decision to end the war was a decision about the future of the nation rather than that of the kaiser.

Payer's account has its own blind spots. He acted as if it had been up to the government to choose war or peace—and the government, rather than the kaiser, did choose. However, the choice was not quite as deliberate as he made it out to be. The Reichstag had met in tumultuous debates between October 22 and 24.<sup>205</sup> From his party's point of view, Friedrich Ebert put the majority consensus of the deputies in a nutshell: "Inasmuch as it is up to us, it will not come to a battle of desperation [*Verzweiflungskampf*]. The first German government of which the Social Democrats are a part must become a government of peace."<sup>206</sup> In a stunning reversal of its previous position, on October 25, the Catholic Center Party opted unanimously against a continuation of the war. On the same day, the majority of the Reichstag had come to the same conclusion.

The emperor dismissed Ludendorff on October 26. On that night, Levetzow ordered the High Sea Fleet on the suicide mission that triggered a mutiny among stokers and sailors. Simultaneously, unrest broke out among skilled metal workers in Berlin and in the Ruhr as a result of the War Ministry's newest recall of workers to the military. When the naval mutiny and the strike linked up with the pervasive food riots by women and children in the urban centers of Germany, the stage for the revolution was set. On November 5, Allied forces routed German forces for the first time and pursued them in flight. The military had to capitulate. As early as October 17, in the same cabinet meeting in which Max von Baden spoke up against Ludendorff, Phillip Scheidemann put popular opinion in a nutshell: "*Lieber ein Ende mit Schrecken als ein Schrecken ohne Ende* [Rather an end with horror than horror without end]."<sup>207</sup>

<sup>205</sup> *Verhandlungen des Reichstags*, 193rd–195th session, October 22–24, 1918, microfiche (Washington, D.C.: Microcard Eds., 1967).

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 193rd session, October 22, 1918, 6165.

<sup>207</sup> Cabinet meeting of October 17 (morning); Matthias and Morsey, *Die Regierung*, p. 229. In this particular case, Bertolt Brecht's poetry imitated life. To Ludendorff's question, whether Scheidemann could not "lift the morale of the masses," Scheidemann responded: "It is a question of potatoes."



## CATASTROPHIC NATIONALISM AND INSURRECTIONARY WAR

Scheidemann was right. The vast majority of Germans, both civilians and soldiers, wanted an end to the war. Although there were differences of opinion, they were ready to blame war on the imperial system—the kaiser, the officer corps, the Junkers, Prussian bureaucracy. The situation was ripe for revolution. Hence, it makes sense for historians to skip the frantic efforts for a last call to arms. They amounted to nothing in October 1918 and may even appear embarrassing, if not outright ludicrous, in the face of popular will. However, much as the Germans were ready to throw overboard the “old system,” they were not ready for defeat. Because of the refusal of German society to come to terms with defeat, October 1918 matters immensely. It is an effect of this refusal that the call for popular insurrection, rather than disappearing with the revolution, gained momentum and national stature after the war. The *Endkampf* that did not happen in 1918 still came to haunt the Germans. It finally caught up with them in January 1943. The battle of Stalingrad was staged as the terminal battle that was averted in 1918.<sup>208</sup> It initiated a long drawn out *Endkampf* that ended in catastrophe—the disaster of defeat with its countless dead, mutilated, and raped men, women, and children and the catastrophic recognition that, having engaged in a war of annihilation, the Germans, alive and dead, had lost their honor and the respect of the world.

The argument that the staved-off *Endkampf* of 1918 reappears in 1943 is not a historical fancy. Neither is it merely a matter of the similarity of the two situations and their radically different outcomes—outcomes which were due to the decision to end war in 1918 and the determination in 1942–43 to make sure that the German people would not and could not renege on war. Rather, there is a substantial link between the two moments. Because German society never came to terms with defeat in 1918, the *Endkampf* fantasies of “limited right-wing circles,” as Levetzow himself admitted on October 25, were to become a national obsession in 1941–42.<sup>209</sup>

The outlines of the choice, in 1942–43, to continue war even in recognition of impending defeat have been presented elsewhere by Bernd Wegner in a startling reconsideration of Hitler’s strategy.<sup>210</sup> I will barely touch on the Second World War, because the work to be done here is to demonstrate that the *Endkampf* proclamations of a few radical nationalists and reactionaries did indeed become a national obsession. This raises the question of how the idea

<sup>208</sup> Michael Kumpfmüller, *Die Schlacht von Stalingrad: Metamorphosen eines deutschen Mythos* (Munich, 1995); Jürgen Förster, ed., *Stalingrad. Ereignis, Wirkung, Symbol* (Munich, 1992).

<sup>209</sup> Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik*, 2:1339.

<sup>210</sup> Bernd Wegner, “Hitler, der Zweite Weltkrieg und die Choreographie des Untergangs,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (forthcoming).

of people's war could possibly become a matter of national identity. Since this consideration stretches our historical imagination of the terminal battle and of people's war beyond the historical moment into myth-history, I will intervene more explicitly into the following historical narrative in order to present cases and exemplars from which a critical history of what I will call "catastrophic nationalism" can be built.

The effects of defeat have, with rare exceptions, not been the subject of historical inquiry, although it is an object of persistent speculation and far-reaching deductions about the severity of the peace settlement.<sup>211</sup> Still, they are captured, as if in a prism, in a field of study that has studiously avoided the topic of defeat because it is oblivious to communal or collective identities—the trauma culture of the Weimar Republic.<sup>212</sup> German trauma culture is profoundly shaped by defeat.<sup>213</sup> It is a culture of the walking dead and their desperate hope of being carried from the shadow of defeat into the light of redemption and rebirth.<sup>214</sup> It contrasts with the French trauma culture of the wounded soldier-survivor who is haunted by the dead.<sup>215</sup> Notwithstanding a significant and fascinating fringe of people obsessed with death,<sup>216</sup> the German culture of the walking dead is not limited to a small, politically and socially marginalized population, an invention of dead-heads and vampyrists then or now.<sup>217</sup> Rather, the ultraconservative president of the Prussian Upper House, Dietlof Count von Arnim-Boitzenburg, and, once again, Walther Rathenau and Friedrich Ebert, may be counted among them. And by the same token, this culture extends into modern mass culture. F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1919) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1929) are obvious cases in point.<sup>218</sup> Put simply, the trauma culture of the walking dead emerges from the mainstream of German politics and culture.

Arnim-Boitzenburg cannot by any means be considered a representative

<sup>211</sup> The formidable exception is Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (n. 21 above).

<sup>212</sup> Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984).

<sup>213</sup> Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*.

<sup>214</sup> Ruth Leys, "Death Masks: Kardiner and Ferenczi on Psychic Trauma," *Representations* 53 (Winter 1996): 44–73.

<sup>215</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge and New York, 1995).

<sup>216</sup> Theodor Lessing, *Haarmann: Die Geschichte eines Werwolfs und andere Gerichtsreportagen* (Munich, 1995).

<sup>217</sup> Birgit Richard, *Todesbilder: Kunst, Subkultur, Medien* (Munich, 1995); Laurence A. Rickels, *The Vampire Lectures* (Minneapolis and London, 1999).

<sup>218</sup> *Nosferatu—Eine Symphonie des Grauens*, F. W. Murnau, director, 1921, produced by Prana Film, black and white; *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang, director, 1925–26, produced by UFA, black and white.

German. However, his support for a last call to arms touched Prince Max von Baden, because it gave words to an emotion that remained for the most part unexpressed in the political debate and yet articulated a cultural universe that explained defeat in universal and, indeed, metaphysical terms. It appealed to a common albeit evangelically inflected piety.

Where there is a will there is a way. If, in the end, this way does not lead to the goal, at least history cannot reprimand us that we have not given everything for our existence and honor. God with us; this must be the battle cry in the current hour as well. God demands from us that we do everything that is within our power. He has led us into a dark valley, possibly in order to reawaken our people and to make them strong so that they may exert their highest moral powers in order to find the way which leads them to victory and the salvation of humanity against falsehood and deceit.<sup>219</sup>

In likening defeat to being led through the valley of shadows, Arnim-Boitzenburg marshaled a powerful Christian symbolism, identifying defeat with death but also pointing to the possibility of redemption or awakening—of passing through the valley of shadows in order to be reborn. This is the language of the German Awakened or reborn Christians. It is a language that was familiar to quite a few members of the Prussian aristocracy (among them such military luminaries as the two Moltkes and Schlieffen) or, for that matter, the southern German pietists. Still, while the Awakened were a smallish group, the message of death and rebirth was far from unique. Indeed, it became the language both of Weimar trauma culture and of *völkisch* nationalism.<sup>220</sup> Regeneration, rebirth, autopoiesis—the idea of emerging from death, whether physically from war, spiritually from the torpor of defeat, or metaphysically from sin and evil, was one, if not the most, potent emotive force of the early Weimar Republic.<sup>221</sup> It was the language of the *Endkampf*. Lest it be overlooked, Arnim-Boitzenburg called neither for a revival meeting nor for a therapy session but for a people's war of the chosen. It is this notion of a war of the righteous—expressed in many of the early calls for people's war—which gave the more mundane efforts of organizing people's war their iconic form. Above all, it set the idea of the people's war free from the circumstances of October 1918. For the battle that will lead out of the valley of shadows can

<sup>219</sup> Max von Baden (n. 40 above), p. 413.

<sup>220</sup> George Mosse, "Tod, Zeit und Geschichte: Die völkische Utopie der Überwindung," in *Deutsches utopisches Denken im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Stuttgart, 1974), pp. 50–69; George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990); Rainer Hering, "'Des deutschen Volkes Wiedergeburt'. Völkischer Nationalismus und politische Erneuerungspläne," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 42 (1994): 1079–84.

<sup>221</sup> Ulrich Linse, *Barfüssige Propheten: Erlöser der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin, 1983).

be fought anytime and anywhere—and it is not an act of state but a matter of spiritual salvation. It is what Rathenau had called “*Gesinnungskrieg*,” a metaphysical war over ultimate values.

The more sinister—perhaps because more secular—version of the same thought was expressed by Rathenau. He had spoken cryptically about the potential devastation of Germany as a consequence of a premature armistice in “A Black Day.” He did not just think of it in passing, because he returned to the subject in a stunning essay, “To All Who Are Not Blinded by Hate,” and more fragmentarily on other occasions.<sup>222</sup> The essay is one of several pieces written by him on the issue of the armistice, although it is the most extreme of the series.<sup>223</sup> The armistice was “annihilation”: “*Es ist die Vernichtung*.” Rathenau did not just leave it at that, but drew this extreme conclusion from a peculiarly capitalist idea of Germany as a mechanized living space. As he explained, Germans used their superior human capital (intelligence, skill, organization) in order to pay for raw material and food stuffs in the best of all worlds. Whether industrialists or laborers, as a nation the Germans engaged in wage labor for the rest of the world. A land of high culture and science, Germany needed its surplus of capital and its savings, the payment for its intellectual labors, in order to buy the material supplies necessary for survival and for happiness. Germans thrived because they worked for the world. If their savings—essentially the surplus wage gained from global labor—were taken away in a rapacious peace, motivated by hatred and revenge, the German civic and technological infrastructure built with the surplus wage—buildings, highways, institutions—would deteriorate, technology would become second-rate, scientific exploration would cease, culture and civilization would collapse. The result was “infertility, emigration, and deepest misery”: “We are being annihilated. Germany’s living body and soul are killed. Millions of German people are driven into poverty and death, homelessness, slavery and despair. One of the most creative people on earth is extinguished. Germany’s mothers, the children, the unborn are being killed [*zu Tode getroffen*].” Rathenau elaborated: Collective death was a matter of monetary strangulation, because capital was “the life force of the people” [*die lebendige Kraft eines Volkes*]. He also reminded his readers of the literary precedent and of the organicist equivalent: excessive demands on German capital could not possibly come from an honest merchant but only from a Shylock. Demanding reparations was to say: “Give me the blood of your body.” Such peace, Rathenau concluded, amounted to “revenge.” It would be the “murder of the German people.”<sup>224</sup>

<sup>222</sup> Walther Rathenau, “An Alle, die der Haß nicht blendet,” *Die Zukunft* 27, no. 11/12 (1918): 318–23.

<sup>223</sup> Rathenau, *Nach der Flut* (n. 108 above).

<sup>224</sup> All quotes from Rathenau, “An Alle, die der Haß nicht blendet.”

It is Rathenau's excess that matters here.<sup>225</sup> Rathenau, it should be emphasized, did not really consider the French a nation of avengers and the Jews as Shylocks.<sup>226</sup> But his embrace of a language of catastrophe inserted and, indeed, wrote him into an imagination that was far more powerful than he was. It is the imagination of servitude and enslavement as social death and of rebirth as an act of liberation. In its hallucinatory and apocalyptic quality, "To All Who Are Not Blinded by Hate" articulates a cultural imagination that carried Rathenau into the realm of national icons and imaginations that ultimately overwhelmed and killed him.<sup>227</sup> In 1922, it would be Rathenau who was assassinated as the Jew who betrayed Germany to a rapacious France.

As in the debate on popular insurrection, Rathenau (and, in a different way, Armin-Boitzenburg) stood at the cusp of two warring political cultures which can be represented by two Reichstag deputies, the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert on the one hand and the conservative nationalist Kuno von Westarp on the other. Rathenau and Armin-Boitzenburg both point to the subterranean linkages between them. In his extreme diction, Rathenau was miles apart from Friedrich Ebert, although the latter said very much the same in his speech to the Reichstag that effectively ended all speculations about a *levée en masse*. It is a remarkable speech in that it literally brought war to an end, because without the Social Democrats there was no national defense. Although it is usually read as an attack on Prussian monarchists and reactionary nationalists, it is equally important for its admonition and warning that the Germans would not, could not accept peace at all costs.

If [the other people of Europe] want to remain our enemies, treat us as the scum of humanity, and take us as their debt peons, we tell them: Watch out, every servitude comes to an end. (Bravo among Social Democrats and on the Left) . . . We want the coming peace to be a firm and eternal compact of free and equal people. . . . If we are disappointed in this goal, we will not give up, because we believe in our people and we will stand with them in loyalty, until liberty comes.<sup>228</sup>

<sup>225</sup> The text should be compared to the more temperate if, in substance, not more conciliatory call for the foundation of a "German Liberty Party." Walther Rathenau, "Aufruf zur Bildung einer 'Partei der deutschen Freiheit,'" in *Politische Aufsätze*, ed. Walther Rathenau (Berlin, 1928), pp. 72–80, here esp. p. 75.

<sup>226</sup> Shulamit Volkov, "Ich bin ein Deutscher Jüdischen Stammes," in *Walther Rathenau, 1867–1922: Die Extreme berühren sich* (n. 117 above), pp. 129–50; Ernst Schulin, "Rathenau et la France," *Revue d'Allemagne* 4, no. 3 (1972): 547–57.

<sup>227</sup> Walther Rathenau, "Stille Bereitung (gegen Kriegsende)," in *Politische Aufsätze*, pp. 172–77, here p. 177. "Es bricht herein, eisig, zäh und dunkel, der Winter einer Völkerwanderung, und der Baum der weißen Menschheit wird nackt und kahl stehen. . . . Freies Bewußtsein der kommenden Weltnacht zieht uns. (The winter of great migration dawns, glacial, grim and dark, and the tree of white humankind stands naked and bare. . . . Awareness and acceptance of the coming world-night befits us.)"

<sup>228</sup> Ebert, *Verhandlungen des Reichstags*, 193rd session, October 22, 1918, 6166.

Germany, Ebert insisted, “must be free or perish.”<sup>229</sup> This, in turn, is quite in line with what the conservative Kuno von Westarp, Ebert’s fierce opponent, said, demanding that the German nation must continue war.

Our people must know what [President Wilson’s demands] are all about. Once enemy forces with their black hordes enter our fatherland, they will deliver the land [*heimatliche Fluren*] to destruction and the population to misery. If we have to sign the peace treaty disarmed and with bound hands, then we, our children and our children’s children will face a servitude that goes far beyond what Prussia had to suffer from the hands of the Corsican conqueror. For generations every German city dweller and peasant, every owner and entrepreneur, and especially every clerk and worker in city and countryside will become the wage slave of our enemies. Liberty will cease to exist in the German lands.<sup>230</sup>

Despite evident differences, among which racism figures most prominently, the language is remarkably consistent across political camps. Defeat is spiritual death to be overcome in acts of redemption. Defeat is the social death of servitude and slavery which can only be shaken off through insurrection.<sup>231</sup> Defeat is a violation, cast as rape of the body politic and eerily resembling the better-known Weimar imagery of sexual violence.<sup>232</sup> Much more could be said about the language and imagery of violence as a language of death, especially if one were to escape the canon of (prose) war literature and entered the realm of poetry or drama, the realms of German subjectivity.<sup>233</sup> But two points matter here. First, in each rendition of defeat, the war’s burden of violence is shifted onto peace-making as violence against the defeated.<sup>234</sup> We are dealing with acts of displacement in which a deliberate German war and defeat disappear

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 6161. He explained: “if the rulers of the enemy countries force an unconditional peace on us, if our economic life forces are raped [*werden unsere wirtschaftlichen Lebenskräfte vergewaltigt*] and our chances for economic development are cut, the working class is hit hard. (Very true, among Social Democrats.) If we are thrown back into a condition which forces hundreds of thousands of workers to emigrate every year, then the German worker is threatened by the fate of the coolie.”

<sup>230</sup> Max von Baden (n. 40 above), p. 411.

<sup>231</sup> On the topos of the enslavement of Germans that runs from Kleist to Hitler, see Ruth Klüger, “Freiheit die ich meine: Fremdherrschaft in Kleists ‘Hermannsschlacht’ und ‘Verlobung in St. Domingo,’” in *Katastrophen: Über deutsche Literatur*, ed. Ruth Klüger (Göttingen, 1994), pp. 133–62.

<sup>232</sup> Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, N.J., 1995).

<sup>233</sup> Thomas Anz and Joseph Vogel, eds., *Die Dichter und der Krieg: Deutsche Lyrik, 1914–1918* (Munich, 1982); Wolfgang Iser, *Literature at War, 1914–1940: Representing the “Time of Greatness” in Germany* (New Haven and London, 1999).

<sup>234</sup> Bruno Thoß, *Der Ludendorff-Kreis, 1919–1923: München als Zentrum der mitteleuropäischen Gegenrevolution zwischen Revolution und Hitler-Putsch* (Munich, 1978); Thimme (n. 123 above).



behind their consequences. Second, in defeat Germans came to accept the war as their own. It is “the Germans” who lost the war. While the kaiser or some imperial conspiracy may have started it, the nation lost it. If the war was imperial, defeat was national. The defenders of the Weimar Republic were singularly unsuccessful in pinning the defeat on the old order.<sup>235</sup> In defeat, the Germans had come to accept the war as their own.

Hence, any redemption of the trauma of war in Germany was national and had to wrestle with the issue of defeat. Redemption from trauma, whether concerning the individual or the state, always entailed a metapolitics of salvaging or resurrecting, of liberating the nation and its body politic. It took on the language and imagery of national liberation. This language was contagious. Virtually any political issue in the Weimar Republic could be interpreted as the escape from servitude into liberty, from oppression into self-government—whether the subject was the individual struggling with the effects of war, the Reichsbank revaluing currency (and the middle classes opposing the move), or foreign policy seeking a way around reparations. Politics was measured in terms of asserting liberty and self-government in opposing foreign occupation and foreign taxation. Needless to say, this politics of redemption also always entailed purging the body politic from weakness and disease, whether as liberation of the body through sex and sports or as rearming and refortifying the body politic—both being tied to the excision of the unfit, be it individuals or entire groups.<sup>236</sup> There was no self-evident dividing line between “progressive” and “reactionary” politics. Neither was the politics of liberation and redemption an “alternative modernity.”<sup>237</sup> It was a politics and culture of defeat that united the nation beyond political fissures.

The pervasiveness and persistence of the language of liberation was one of the key features of Weimar culture. It was simultaneously the language of people’s war and popular insurrection that was championed by the military on the one hand and the radical Right on the other. Thus, a Reichswehr document stated unequivocally, “Germany will not be spared military conflict. Economic and monetary wars will not liberate Germany from her current condition. Only

<sup>235</sup> The controversy between Rathenau and Maximilian Harden over the former’s assessment of the armistice is a case in point. Harden’s compelling argument in favor of the armistice has quite completely disappeared. See, e.g., Maximilian Harden, “Das Recht soll siegen,” *Die Zukunft* 103, nos. 1–3 (1918): 1–64; Peter Berglar, “Walther Rathenau und Maximilian Harden: Zur Problematik ihrer Freundschaft,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 209, no. 1 (1969): 75–94.

<sup>236</sup> Michael Epkenhans, “‘Wir als deutsches Volk sind nicht klein zu kriegen . . .’ Aus den Tagebüchern des Fregattenkapitäns Bogislav von Selchow 1918/19,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 55 (1996): 165–224.

<sup>237</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984).



a war with weapons can gain liberty and national self-determination and prepare the way for economic and cultural resurrection.”<sup>238</sup> Violent liberation and self-determination are key elements of Adolf Hitler’s stump speeches as well.<sup>239</sup> One of his favorite images was the characterization of Germany as a colony and of the Germans as slaves—which he took as his main reason for the Germans to stage an upheaval. Violence was inscribed into the very language of liberation.

The talk about liberation and redemption was never simply idle talk. While the idea of salvation permeated all of interwar politics and made it so intractable, it was also concrete preparation for the violent overthrow of the national and international order. The soft violence of rhetorical excess had its hard edge in the preparation of future war. The year 1923 was a threshold in that the hopes for an immediate uprising were dashed when the Weimar political and social elites, backed by a majority of Germans, decided against insurrectionary war to counter the French occupation of the Ruhr, staged to extract reparations from a recalcitrant Germany. The attempted coup of the radical Right in Munich, led by Ludendorff and Hitler, was put down. But the politics of redemption retained its violent edge, even after Weimar politics had opted for a course of “peaceful change.”

What was the power of language and imagery that allowed people who either did not consider violence opportune or outright rejected it to endorse an idea that was intrinsically violent? What made a Rathenau the foremost champion of a “politics of fulfillment” (of the Versailles Treaty), while carrying along a blood-curdling language of redemption? Conversely, what made Hitler with his outrageous rhetoric palatable to Germans who wanted peace? The short answer is that both found common ground in a shared national myth of liberation that was preconfigured in a politics of German national memory. Liberation was conceived as overcoming oppression by combating fratricide which Germans knew in at least two ways—as the biblical story of Cain and Abel and as memory of the fratricidal Thirty Years’ War, refracted through the prism of the “war of national liberation” against Napoleon that in turn overcame the effects of German fratricide. There was no shortage of deadly precedent in pursuit of liberation.<sup>240</sup>

Once we begin to trace back the German language of national liberation, we discover in due course not just a romantic imagination of death and sacrifice but also of self-fashioning as destruction and annihilation.<sup>241</sup> In fact, it is tempt-

<sup>238</sup> Reichswehrministerium Zentrale 342/23 I, May 23, 1923, BA-MA RW6/v. 37.

<sup>239</sup> See below, pp. 520–21.

<sup>240</sup> Ulf Hedetoft, *War and Death as Touchstone of National Identity* (Aalborg, 1990).

<sup>241</sup> Hans Peter Herrmann, *Machtphantasie Deutschland: Nationalismus, Männlichkeit und Fremdenhass im Vaterlandsdiskurs deutscher Schriftsteller des 18. Jahrhun-*

ing to interpret Rathenau's call for a *levée en masse* as a creative translation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* (1808), which Max Reinhardt had incorporated into his German cycle in 1916–17 and which subsequently became a staple of the “iron romanticism” of the National Socialist stage.<sup>242</sup> Suffice it here to say that nothing about the idea of national liberation as an act of rebirth or, for that matter, about the conflation of liberation and self-destruction was new. Defeat in 1918 triggered powerful memories and myths of salvation which all point back to the catastrophic formation of German national consciousness in the face of the French revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath. The famous concluding words of Kleist's *German Catechism*, in the typical question and answer format of catechisms, offer an example of this language and imagery:

Q: Even if everything would perish [*untergehen*] and no human being, women and children included, were to survive, would you still condone insurrection?

A: Yes, my father.

Q: Why?

A: Because God loves it, if human beings die in pursuit of liberty.

Q: But what is a horror to him?

A: If slaves live.<sup>243</sup>

It is because of this kind of “deep” memory that the Weimar language of defeat and redemption, of enslavement and liberation, was so difficult to dislodge.

There is another example, though, that is a good deal more pertinent, because it is explicitly invoked by the main actors both in 1918 and in 1942–43: the epos of the Nibelungs. This epos, in its modern renditions, was crucial in acculturating the terror of the envisioned terminal battle into the mainstream of Weimar culture. I take for granted here the central role of the *Nibelungenlied*

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derts (Frankfurt, 1996); Hasko Zimmer, *Auf dem Altar des Vaterlands: Religion und Patriotismus in der deutschen Kriegslyrik des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt, 1971). Albert Portmann-Tinguely, *Romantik und Krieg: Eine Untersuchung zum Bild des Krieges bei deutschen Romantikern und Freiheitssängern* (Freiburg [Schweiz], 1989); Klaus Vondung, “Träume von Tod und Untergang: Präludien zur Apokalypse in der deutschen Literatur und Kunst vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Von kommenden Zeiten: Geschichtsprophetien im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Joachim H. Knoll and Julius H. Schoeps (Stuttgart and Bonn, 1984), pp. 143–68.

<sup>242</sup> Jan Philipp Reemtsma, “Blutiger Boden: Streifzug durch ein Textgelände,” *Mittelweg* 36 8, no. 3 (1999): 3–48.

<sup>243</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, “Katechismus der Deutschen, abgefaßt nach dem Spanischen zum Gebrauch für Kinder und Alte,” in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Heinrich von Kleist (Darmstadt, 1983), pp. 350–60, here p. 360.

as German national epos,<sup>244</sup> the reworking of the epos throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in drama and music,<sup>245</sup> its mass and high intellectual popularity in the teens and especially the twenties,<sup>246</sup> and its uses for military ends.<sup>247</sup> As a case in point, I might well have picked the interwar interpretations of Wagner's Ring Cycle.<sup>248</sup> However, the more specific symbolic labor that is associated with the *Endkampf*—war to the point of self-destruction—found its mass-cultural articulation not in Bayreuth but in German cinema: Fritz Lang's two-part motion picture *Die Nibelungen* (1924), scripted by Thea von Harbou on the basis of her *Nibelungenbuch*.<sup>249</sup> The ideological labor of Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* is the point of departure for a self-evident, because already imagined, war of annihilation to the point of self-destruction in 1943. In order to appreciate the full impact of Lang's work, we would do well to consider first two postwar invocations of the Nibelungs, by Ernst Barlach, on the one hand, and by Ludendorff, on the other, that point to moments of hesitation and ambivalence, absent from Lang's cinematic work. Both Barlach's and Ludendorff's renditions of the Nibelungs represent work on myth that, in spite of their violence, hold annihilation in abeyance.

The "violence and power" of the 1922 cycle of charcoal drawings by Ernst Barlach on the *Nibelungen* is comparable to Otto Dix's cycle of etchings entitled *War*.<sup>250</sup> Peter Paret, in his interpretation of the Barlach drawings, marvels

<sup>244</sup> Otfried Ehrismann, *Das Nibelungenlied in Deutschland: Studien zur Rezeption des Nibelungenlieds von der Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 1975); Roswitha Mattausch and Viktoria Schmitt-Linsenhoff, "Vom Nationalepos zur Weltanschauungsoper—Die Rezeption des Nibelungenliedes 1800 bis 1918," in *Trophäe oder Leichenstein? Kulturgeschichtliche Aspekte des Geschichtsbewußtseins in Frankfurt im 19. Jahrhundert. 100 Jahre Historisches Museum Frankfurt am Main 1878–1978* (Frankfurt, 1978), pp. 302–25.

<sup>245</sup> John Evert Härd, *Das Nibelungenepos: Wertung und Wirkung von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart*, trans. Christine Palm (Tübingen, 1996); David J. Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal* (Princeton, N.J., 1998).

<sup>246</sup> See Klaus von See, "Das Nibelungenlied—Ein Nationalepos," in *Die Nibelungen: Ein deutscher Wahn, eine deutscher Alptraum; Studien und Dokumente zur Rezeption des Nibelungenstoffes im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Joachim Heinze and Anneliese Waldschmidt (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), pp. 43–110.

<sup>247</sup> Münkler and Storch, *Siegfrieden* (n. 16 above).

<sup>248</sup> Joachim Köhler, *Wagners Hitler: Der Prophet und sein Vollstrecker*, 2d ed. (Munich, 1997).

<sup>249</sup> *Die Nibelungen. Teil 1: Siegfried. Teil 2: Kriemhilds Rache*, Fritz Lang, director, 1924, screenplay by Thea von Harbou, 3216m (Teil 1), 3576m (Teil 2), black and white; Thea Harbou, *Das Nibelungenbuch* (Munich, 1923).

<sup>250</sup> Ernst Barlach, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Hanau, repr. 1983); Peter Paret, "Field Marshal and Beggar: Ernst Barlach in the First World War," in Peter Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism, 1840–1945* (Cambridge and New York, 2001).

at the creative tension in an artist who, at one and the same time, produced some of the most heart-wrenching war memorials (exploring the themes of suffering and death as in the *Mater Dolorosa/Dona Nobis Pacem* in Kiel) and the gut-wrenching violence of the Nibelungs that stands out in postwar art, notwithstanding the violent exhibitionism of expressionist art. Barlach's *Nibelungen* sequence concentrates—as does Lang's and Harbou's work—on what had come to matter in the aftermath of the war, the *Endkampf*, when Kriemhild slashes the head off a wounded Hagen, an overwhelming figure even when slumped on the ground—"drawings in which blood spurts and drips across the page."<sup>251</sup> Hagen, of course, is the survivor of slaughter in Etzel's palace and the single subject of the revenge of Kriemhild, whose husband, Siegfried, he had killed. Barlach's moment of hesitation is not about violence and rage, which he presents with grim determination and extraordinary matter-of-factness. Rather, it is the more profound and, one might say, existential choice that is posed in the juxtaposition of a blood-splattering Kriemhild and the no less violent suffering of the *Mater Dolorosa*. For Barlach's question, representing these two archetypal female figures, is: What gives strength to the heart that bleeds with grief in the face of death? Is suffering the road to redemption or is it the road to rage? This was the existential choice of Weimar trauma culture that escaped all efforts at normalization. This choice, invested in the epic figures of Kriemhild and her no less violent antidote, the *mater dolorosa*, haunted soldiers in World War II and still echoed in the memory of a German chancellor who considered himself graced by his late birth.<sup>252</sup>

The other instance of hesitation, Ludendorff's rendering of the Nibelungs, expresses a yearning for tradition and a nostalgia for the past that was lost in October 1918. Ludendorff's nostalgia participated in the extremist imagery and yet, at the crucial moment, disavowed it—first in his rendering of the Nibelungs and subsequently in life. We have seen others compare Ludendorff to Siegfried at two crucial junctures in the unfolding events of September and October 1918. Shortly after the armistice Ludendorff himself came to identify with Siegfried—and of all the things he did and wrote subsequently, this was one of his most rational acts.

In December 1918 or January 1919, Ludendorff composed a "testament"—not because he feared death, but because Germany was in mortal danger. In

<sup>251</sup> Paret, *German Encounters*, p. 179.

<sup>252</sup> Elmar Jansen, *Ernst Barlach, Käthe Kollwitz: Berührungen, Grenzen, Gegenbilder* (Berlin, 1989); Regina Schulte, "Kaethe Kollwitz's Sacrifice," *History Workshop Journal* 41 (Spring 1996): 193–221; Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Kohl und Kollwitz: Staats- und Weiblichkeitsdiskurse in der Neuen Wache 1993," in *Das Volk: Abbild, Konstruktion, Phantasma*, ed. Annette Graczyk (Berlin, 1996), pp. 185–205.

his testament for the nation he extolled the events of 1918 in the spirit of the Nibelungs—at first sight one of the many glosses that made up the stab-in-the-back legend.

*Die Zeit der Nibelungen Not ist für Deutschland da, der Nibelungen Ende darf nicht kommen. . . . Der Nibelungen Ende darf und wird nicht kommen!*

The time for the agony of the Nibelungs is here, the end of the Nibelungs must not come. . . . The end of the Nibelungs must not and shall not come.<sup>253</sup>

The invocation of the Nibelungs served Ludendorff to give his otherwise trite and, at this point, well-rehearsed interpretation of events in 1918 an epic sheen. The Allies were out to annihilate the Germans—an act which he captured dramatically as rape: “*Die Entente vergewaltigt Deutschland!* [The Entente rapes Germany].” The ideas of humanity and reconciliation are but the pipe dreams of a misguided and misled people who listened to false prophets and their blandishments of happiness rather than to those who could only promise more hardship. “*Wir mußten siegen oder wurden geschlagen* [We had to win or would be beaten].” But in their abject misery the German people forgot that this was war over life and death. And, more poignantly: the people were “alienated”—alienated, though, in the mythical and biblical meaning of fraternal war. They fought as a people but were divided among themselves. As a result, the army did not receive enough “human and soul power” [*Menschen und Seelenkraft*] so that “the Supreme Command had to declare already in August that the war could no longer be won.” Looking into the future, Ludendorff augured that a repeat of the Nibelungs’ end could, nonetheless, be averted if the deepest values of society were cherished anew. “*Heilig sei Religion, Familie und Eigentum* [Sacrosanct be religion, family and property].” Hence, he ended his testament not with slaughter but by insisting that “the end of the Nibelungs must not come.”

Ludendorff’s premature closure of the epos at its midpoint is a most peculiar but revealing solution for a man who came to represent the conviction that the imperial army could and should have fought on. His rendering of the story unwittingly hits on the problem of the epic figure of Siegfried, who is the hero of the *Nibelungenlied* and yet is killed before the second half of the epos, the *Endkampf* of the Nibelungs in Etzel’s palace, gets under way. Ludendorff’s insistence that this second half must not come articulates a nostalgia for the Siegfried cult of the Wilhelmine era. The gilded image of Siegfried portrayed a youthful hero who brought together religion, family, and property in a triumphal, imperial fantasy—a slain dragon guaranteed invulnerability; a slain

<sup>253</sup> Breucker (n. 3 above), p. 165.

dwarf (Alberich) with secretive powers, prosperity; and the mastery over savage love (Brünhilde), manliness. It is easy enough to see who was defeated here: fathers, Jews, and women. The problem was that this triumphal Siegfried was gone in 1918 and, with him, the *Siegfrieden* program of the Wilhelmine Right. And so it is: a careful look at the many renderings of the stab-in-the-back legend and their invocation of the Siegfried myth quickly reveal the main investment of such storytelling. They amount to an attempt at make-believe that the outcome of the war could and should have been otherwise—that the Wilhelmine Siegfried should not have died. It was nostalgia for a lost age, but this Siegfried myth was not the inspiration for the *Endkampf*. It was a call for veterans' parades. His hatreds notwithstanding, Ludendorff stopped short of thinking the end of the Nibelungs. It is no coincidence that, after the failed coup of 1923, he ended up founding a religious sect together with his second wife, Mathilde von Kemnitz, a philosopher by profession and a charismatic healer by vocation.<sup>254</sup> Like so many in Weimar Germany, Ludendorff replayed the situation of October 1918: The end must not come.

The contrast to Hitler could not be more vivid. When French troops occupied the Ruhr area in order to ensure reparation payments in 1923, it was not Ludendorff but Hitler who emerged as the most fiery propagandist of a people's war. Hitler envisioned war beyond war. He called for a *Flammenzeichen*, letters of fire, in 1923 in a rhetorical set piece that became one of his favorite devices during these years. He would rehearse this rhetoric time and again until 1945. Pulling together bits and pieces of a historical narrative of national liberation,<sup>255</sup> he had established the elements of a rhetoric of fiery self-destruction by 1924 in the aftermath of the failed coup in Munich which was to force the issue of national insurrection:

The Ruhr should have become the German Moscow! We would have had to demonstrate that the German people of 1923 are no longer the people of 1918! It would have been necessary to show the world with letters of fire: The German people is no longer ready to bow under the yoke! And if even worse agony came upon us! Agony come! The people of dishonor and shame is once again a people of heroes! Behind the burning Ruhr such a people would have organized its resistance come life or death. . . . Now a

<sup>254</sup> Hans Kopp, *Geschichte der Ludendorff-Bewegung* (N.p., 1975); Gert Borst, "Die Ludendorff-Bewegung, 1919–1961: Eine Analyse monologer Kommunikationsformen in der sozialen Zeitkommunikation" (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, 1969).

<sup>255</sup> Eberhard Jäckel, ed., *Hitler: Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen, 1905–1924* (Stuttgart, 1980), esp. "Vaterland oder Kolonie," July 20, 1921, p. 440, but also see pp. 870, 879. The ups and down of national liberation rhetoric can be traced following the abundant Clausewitz references through Hitler's career. Adolf Hitler, *Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen: Februar 1925 bis Januar 1933*, ed. Clemens Vollnhals (Munich and New York, 1992).

new hour begins. Furnace upon furnace; bridge upon bridge blown up! Germany is awakening! France's army would never have been whipped into the horror of this apocalypse! By God, we'd be in a different place today.<sup>256</sup>

In a more prosaic language, Stülpnagel had very much the same things to say in his preparation of people's war: "France fights for loot and gain from a sense of superiority. Her sons and mothers will not be inclined to make great sacrifice for these goals. Hence, if she faces tenacious resistance, if the body count [*blutige Opfer*] adds up, if the risk increases, then it might well come to the point that the French people are soon war-weary and ready to release us into liberty."<sup>257</sup>

These two quotes lay to rest doubts over the profusion of metaphors of liberation and redemption in conjunction with people's war.<sup>258</sup> They also serve to introduce a tougher lot who saw the epos of the Nibelungs to their conclusion, the fiery end in Etzel's palace where the Nibelungs died as a defeated but stubbornly fighting people to be reborn as poetry, popular novel, and movie. Felix Dahn, best-selling author of *A Battle over Rome*, had already set the tone for this engrossment with death in the late nineteenth century:

*Und lachend wie der grimme Hagen  
spring in die Schwerter und den Tod.  
Wir stiegen auf in Kampfgewittern  
der Heldentod ist unser Recht.  
Die Erde soll im Kern erzittern,  
wann fällt ihr tapferstes Geschlecht:  
Brach Etzel's Haus in Glut zusammen,  
als er die Nibelungen zwang,  
So soll Europa stehn in Flammen  
bei der Germanen Untergang.*<sup>259</sup>

<sup>256</sup> Adolf Hitler: *Sein Leben und seine Reden*, ed. Adolf-Viktor von Koerber (Munich, 1923), pp. 77–78. "Das Ruhrgebiet hätte das deutsche Moskau werden müssen! Wir hätten erweisen müssen, daß das deutsche Volk von 1923 nicht mehr das Volk von 1918 ist! Es wäre notwendig gewesen, der Welt durch ein gewaltiges Flammenzeichen Kunde zu geben: das deutsche Volk ist nicht länger mehr gewillt, sich zu beugen! Und wenn noch ärgere Not über uns käme! Es soll Not kommen! Das Volk der Entehrung und Schande ist jetzt wieder zum Volk der Helden geworden! Hinter dem brennenden Ruhrgebiet hätte ein solches Volk seinen Widerstand auf Tod und Leben organisiert. . . . Jetzt bricht eine andere Stunde an. Ofen um Ofen, Brücke um Brücke gesprengt! Deutschland erwacht! Frankreichs Armee hätte sich nicht in das Grauen eines solchen Weltunterganges peitschen lassen! Bei Gott, wir ständen bereits heute anders da!" On variants, see Jäckel, *Hitler*, pp. 967, 982, 985.

<sup>257</sup> Nr. 279/24 T11B geh. to Truppenamt; BA-MA, NI Stülpnagel N5/20.

<sup>258</sup> On Joseph Goebbels treating the same theme of the Ruhr and insurrection, see Claus E. Bärsch, "Die Geschichtsprophetie des Joseph Goebbels," in *Von kommenden Zeiten: Geschichtsprophetien im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, pp. 169–78.b.

<sup>259</sup> Felix Dahn, quoted in Händ (n. 245 above), p. 173.



And laughing like the wrathful Hagen  
 jump into the swords and death  
 We emerged in the thunder of battle  
 the hero's death is our right.  
 The earth must tremble in its core  
 when its fiercest clan is smitten  
 As Etzel's palace burnt to the ground  
 when he defeated the Nibelungs  
 Europe shall go up in flames  
 with the destruction of the Germans.

The hero of this more brutal disposition was not Siegfried but his assassin and Kriemhild's antagonist, Hagen von Tronje, the vassal who fought to save the honor of his royal lords.<sup>260</sup> The Siegfried cult of the prewar years gave way to the Hagen cult of the postwar period. Its subject was not youth and wealth but murder and self-destruction.

*Wir bleiben Hagens Volk.*

...

*Immer sind die Blumen  
 um unsere tiefsten Quellen rot von Mord  
 an Bruder und am Freunde. Hagens Volk.*<sup>261</sup>

We remain the people of Hagen.

...

The flowers around our deepest wells are always red with murder of brother and friend.  
 Hagen's people.

When in 1924 Fritz Lang attempted to "revive the world of myth once again—alive and credible at the same time" in order to inspire our "chaotic age," he turned to the *Nibelungen*, dividing the epic material into two parts: *Siegfried* and *Kriemhild's Revenge*—past and future.<sup>262</sup> The two figures that move the story are Hagen, who kills Siegfried in the first part, and Kriemhild of the Nibelung clan (Siegfried's widow who marries Etzel, the king of the Huns, in order to seek revenge for her first husband's murder) who, in the second part, kills Hagen. Hagen had come to Etzel's court together with his lords upon the invitation of Kriemhild. Scheming the death of Hagen,

<sup>260</sup> On the uses of Hagen, see Werner Wunderlich, *Der Schatz des Drachentöters: Materialien zur Wirkungsgeschichte des Nibelungenliedes* (Stuttgart, 1977).

<sup>261</sup> "Odenwaldbrunnen," in Ernst Bertram, *Der Rhein: Ein Gedenkbuch* (Munich, 1922), p. 47.

<sup>262</sup> Fritz Lang, *Worauf es im Nibelungenfilm ankam* (N.p., n. d. [1924]), p. 2, quoted in Heinz B. Heller, "'Man stellt Denkmäler nicht auf den flachen Asphalt': Fritz Langs Nibelungen-Film," in *Die Nibelungen: Ein deutscher Wahn*, pp. 351–68, here p. 351.

Kriemhild countenanced the death of her kin (pushing the severed head of her brother into the face of an unwavering Hagen) in a gigantic inferno when Etzel, at Kriemhild's behest, burnt down his own palace which thus became the funeral pyre or, as Hitler put it, the *Flammenzeichen* for the Nibelungs. Hagen survived the fiery death as a wounded man and, being taken and bound as prisoner, was cut down by Kriemhild. This story, with all its untold variations and complications, has been many things for many people. It is the story of a "pitiless love . . . for a dead man."<sup>263</sup> For Lang—and in this he was part of a much more general German reception as opposed to the American one, which only seems to know Wagner's version—it was the story of fratricidal or, more properly, sibling wars as the archetype of domestic strife and disunity with its deleterious effect of setting women against men and enfeebling the *ethne* or race to the point of self-destruction.

Lang followed the inspiration of his wife Thea von Harbou, who had dedicated her *Nibelungenbuch* to him in a brazen alliteration that cathects the personal onto the political: "*Dir und Deutschland* [To you and Germany]." Need we recall that the *Nibelungenbuch* is above all the story of Kriemhild, the blond with the "silken skin" who gives herself to "the yellow-skinned cowboy [gelben Pferdskerl]," King Etzel, in order to revenge her murdered (first) husband, Siegfried?<sup>264</sup> That she caused the death of Siegfried, her true love? We do not know what Lang thought about his wife's curious gift and its sexual politics, about the relentless conflation of victims and killers and of purity and danger, although in hindsight the conflation is ominous. It was and, to some extent, still is the stuff for endless debate. Lang in any case staged Kriemhild's revenge in what is surely one of the most spectacular scenes of a holocaust, nearly thirty minutes long with excruciating high drama and astonishing long takes. Hagen dominates Lang's film from the very outset of *Kriemhilds Rache* when he attends the wake of the man he had murdered, appearing first as a shadow that fills the hall and then entering in full armor, dwarfing everybody around him. And at the end, he is led from the ruins as a captive, badly wounded but unbent, meeting his destiny. He is invulnerable in his determination to see the battle to the end: to be struck down, beheaded, by Kriemhild. Hagen captured the fantasies of terminal battle. Kriemhild conflates rage with shame and, in this fusion of the personal and the political, mobilizes the mythical energy of *Endkampf* at the heart of the German national epos in which her clan, the Nibelungs, come to ruin in the inferno of Etzel's palace. Who and what she is—avenger? mater dolorosa?—is another one of those issues that will never be resolved. What we find here, though, in the pitiless

<sup>263</sup> Lang, *Worauf es im Nibelungenfilm ankam*, p. 14.

<sup>264</sup> Harbou, *Das Nibelungenbuch*, p. 117. In Harbou, the words are those of Hagen who is taunting the ghost of Siegfried.

antagonism of Hagen and Kriemhild, is the mass-cultural expression of the “spirit” of annihilation in fratricidal or civil war—desire, lust, shame, horror, all wrapped up in a grandiose coup de grace in which Kriemhild gets her man and kills him on the funeral pyre of Etzel’s palace which had swallowed her family; a politics of memory in which a dead killer, who saw his destiny to the end and faced death without blinking, emerges as the hero; a metaphysics of innocence in which the guilty are redeemed because they pursue a cause, the integrity of the clan of the Nibelungs, for its own sake into self-destruction. This is *Endkampf* imagined in 1924.

In January 1943, Hermann Göring returned to the image of the Nibelungs’ end when extolling the virtues of the Sixth Army in Stalingrad. One day before their actual capitulation at Stalingrad, he celebrated in Berlin the tenth anniversary of the Nazi seizure of power in a speech, broadcast to Stalingrad, that extolled the virtue of self-destruction—to a national audience and the surviving soldiers of this last day of the battle of Stalingrad. He revisited the scene that Fritz Lang had etched into the memory of a mass public:

And among all these gigantic battles, one gigantic monument, Stalingrad stands out—the battle of Stalingrad. Once upon a time this will have been the greatest of the heroic battles which will have ever happened in our history. . . . We know a mighty heroic epos of a battle without comparison; this is the “Battle of the Nibelungs.” The Nibelungs as well stood in a hall of fire and flames and quenched their thirst with their own blood—but fought and fought to the last. This kind of battle is fought again today at Stalingrad, and every German, a thousand years hence, must speak the word with holy dread—and remember that this is where in the end Germany set the stamp for final victory.<sup>265</sup>

Göring lionized the Nibelungs’ readiness for self-annihilation, although he may still have believed in victory. Hitler had no need to believe in victory. Keenly aware of the refusal of the Germans to fight in 1918, he made sure that they would not renege again. This time another funeral pyre would seal German self-destruction.<sup>266</sup> What was sown in 1918 was harvested in 1943.

\* \* \*

In 1948, the brilliant French scholar of German literature, Rudolf Minder, pointed to Hagen’s “creative passion and destructive violence” and argued that, unique among heroes, Hagen creates chaos. He wrecks rooted sentiment, moral

<sup>265</sup> Peter Krüger, “Etzels Halle und Stalingrad: Die Rede Görings vom 30.1.1943,” in *Die Nibelungen: Ein deutscher Wahn*, pp. 151–90, here p. 180.

<sup>266</sup> Christian Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler’s Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews,” *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 4 (1998): 759–812.

obligation, and a sense of human togetherness. In his relentless defense of honor and loyalty, he radically destroys these supreme values on the funeral pyre of Etzel's palace. Minder likened Hitler to Hagen and suggested that the mythical hero and the very real tyrant embody, as image and reality, the mythical core of modern German existence.<sup>267</sup>

There were moments when historians were inclined to accept such brilliant literary sleights of hand and take them for what they are worth. But this is not one of them and, hence, an instant disclaimer is necessary. Hitler, of course, is not Hagen, nor is there any indication that he was personally playing out the *Nibelungenlied* (in Lang's or Wagner's or in any other versions). Neither are the Germans a people particularly prone to chaos or destruction. While both kinds of argument have been tried, time and again, they do not work. But this is not what Minder had in mind either—a point that deserves some emphasis, because it has become common and, it seems, quite permissible to attribute all manner of bizarre thought to French intellectuals. Minder rather pointed out in a literary analysis—and this essay retraces a similar observation in a historian's effort to make sense of one of the stranger German debates in October 1918 over the alternative of ending or continuing war—that nations have stores of (self-)destructive fantasies which, when triggered by events and circumstances and mobilized by politicians and propagandists can take on a life of their own with quite extraordinary consequences. Much of the bafflement of subsequent generations arises from the discovery that such intoxicating material exists in a culture and that it can have such terrifying effects.

To be sure, a grander argument could be made: that all modern nations have at their core a myth of self-destruction that articulates the sheer chaos of imagined origins; that only in risking collective death or, for that matter, in having suffered collective death (another literary figure in which the part stands in for the whole) did they become a modern nation; that nations exist “to die for.”<sup>268</sup> There is plenty of material to suggest this line of inquiry in Germany and elsewhere. While this is the perspective to keep in mind, the argument of this essay is more circumscribed. It does not concern the question of what nations have done or ought to do, but of what a nation, the German nation, did in the throes of defeat after an interminably long and excruciatingly exhausting and, indeed, devastating war.

I have suggested in this essay that the discussion of a *levée en masse* in October 1918 entailed extraordinary choices. I have tried to demonstrate the

<sup>267</sup> Robert Minder, *Allemagne et les Allemandes: Essai d'histoire culturelle* (Paris, 1948), 1:245: “Dans cette rage concentrée, dans ce sadomasochisme gigantesque, quelle figure plus hitlérienne que le Hagen du *Nibelungenlied*?”

<sup>268</sup> Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, N.J., 1999).

profound desire for self-defense as a consequence of the pride and trust in self-government that moved the majority parties of the Reichstag; the relentless pursuit of a terminal battle in order to salvage, if not a collapsing monarchical regime, the honor of the military and, indeed, of the nation-in-arms; the painful decision to forgo any last call to arms, motivated by utilitarian considerations about the public good of the nation, but driven ultimately by a popular upheaval against the war; and, finally, the unintended consequence of this forfeiture, the articulation of historically and mythically charged fantasies of renewal through self-destruction. The debates and decisions of October 1918 brought the war to a deliberate end, but they also set the agenda for a war of annihilation to come.<sup>269</sup>

October 1918—more broadly we could speak of the period 1917–23—was one of those moments when, in the face of military defeat, a fateful connection was made. This was a connection, expressed in a highly charged emotional language with powerful myth-historical and biblical allusions, that linked “last-ditch” efforts to avert defeat with a readiness for self-destruction and the latter with a new willingness to abandon all restraint in warfare. None of the elements entering the emergent *imaginaire* of insurrectionary warfare or *Volkskrieg* were new, but they had been mostly dormant and disconnected, reserved for otherwise quite grandiose fictions of catastrophe that only prosperous and self-assured nations can afford, and pushed to the margins by an altogether more triumphant self-understanding for which a youthful Siegfried stood as the supreme rendition. To die young was beautiful and tragic at the same time. To live defeated after four years of battle was neither. Now, the haunting images of darker times came to the fore.

While both military and cultural historians may prefer a more detailed reading of their specific side of things, it seems to me particularly important to emphasize how closely intertwined the imaginary and the real were and how they thrived on each other. Much of the effort of this essay has been consumed in making this point—so much so that one might forget the historical purpose of the exercise. To be sure, the story itself is curious and worth telling. But the issue at stake is this: How was it possible that the overwhelming majority of Germans wanted nothing more than to go home and live in peace in 1917–23 and, yet, their advocates could never find a language of peace that conferred legitimacy on their effort to end war beyond the immediacy of the desire of

<sup>269</sup> Neither is 1918 the beginning nor is 1943 the end of this story of a catastrophic nationalism which has a “cult of the defensive” as its military equivalent. A brief sketch of the *Volkskrieg* tradition from Carl Clausewitz’s *On War* (1832) to Carl Schmitt’s *Theory of the Partisan* (1963) concludes a much shortened version of this essay to be published in Daniel Moran, ed., *The People in Arms: Military Myth and Legitimacy since the French Revolution* (Cambridge and New York, 2002).

alleviating an unbearable condition? Conversely, why did a distinctly minoritarian, right-radical point of view—the one about *Endkampf* and *Volkskrieg*—have such a compelling appeal? Why could the idea of a *levée*, fighting for the new freedoms of Germany against the chauvinism of French and English leaders (after discarding the German ones), be so forgotten, while the idea of a popular insurrection had such resonance and continues to have it to this very day? The answer(s) cannot be found in debating the terms of peace, although the latter is an entirely worthwhile undertaking. The terms of the debate were set before the Versailles Treaty was signed. Instead, they must be sought in the kind of cultural repertory that was available, which made an exceedingly compelling case for continuing war beyond the point of defeat, while having little to offer in terms of legitimating the alternative and prudent choice to capitulate.

Surprisingly little evidence supports the contention that the military elites or the Right ever repressed or denied the fact of defeat. While it may well be the case that a public, nostalgic for better times, read the discussion about the causes of the German defeat in this fashion, the idea of a denial of defeat is the wishful thinking of historians who shy away from the real challenge of 1918. The stab-in-the-back legend, at least in its military and rightist version, argued a different case. It hinged on the idea that the shame of defeat could have been avoided if the nation had fought on in the face of defeat. It insisted on the right and the necessity for a people or nation to fight on after defeat—and it is this idea, born from a catastrophic nationalism, that proved to be so compelling. It was this idea that was embodied in the mythical figure of Hagen, refined into a military doctrine of *Volkskrieg* by the Reichswehr—and put into practice with the turn to strategic defense in 1941–42 and to operational defense in 1942–43. Needless to say, this is also the moment when the Third Reich irrevocably turned to a course of total annihilation. Self-destruction and annihilation are inseparable, both in myth and in history. They held the Germans and their victims in an iron grip during the Second World War.